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BLACK CHRISTMAS

by LEE HAYS

FIRST CAME THE BLOOD-CHILLING MOANING ON THE PHONE . . .

The girl listened as if hypnotized to the low wailing sound, like that of a wounded animal, and felt her flesh creep at the insane sexuality she heard in it.

Then came the strange voices, weird and revolting.

First: “Don’t do that to me. Not that. Do you hear me, I can’t stand it.”

Next: “Nasty Billy. Don’t ever do that again. That will teach you. What you did was bad. You’re bad . . . bad . . . nasty Billy.”

And finally, another voice, low, sickening: “I’m going to kill you . . .”

Nasty Billy. Who was he? Nasty Billy. Where was he? Nasty Billy. When and how would he strike again? Nasty, nasty, nasty Billy . . .

’Twas The Night Before Christmas—And Somewhere In The House A Santa Of Satan Was Delivering Death

What was left of a beautiful girl was gift-wrapped in a plastic bag. The body of a woman swung like a decoration from the ceiling. The torn flesh of another female victim bled bright red as holly berries.

And below in the decaying old mansion a terrified young woman waited for the grotesque voice on the telephone that would tell her she was about to join the others in this hideous holiday of unholy evil . . .

BLACK CHRISTMAS

by LEE HAYS

Based on a screenplay by Roy Moore
Produced and directed by Bob Clark
Distributed by Warner Brothers

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BLACK CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER ONE

It was a gentle snow that was falling on and around the large Victorian mansion located on the spacious grounds of what had once been the property of the richest man in town. It had been snowing intermittently for several days and there was no question but that the people of the town where the mansion was located would have a white Christmas. The snow seemed almost to keep time with the young voices somewhere in the distance finishing the last refrain of "Silent Night."

The house had, of course, seen better days, inside and out. The family that had owned it had provided fresh paint each year and inside the walls, chandeliers, furniture and rugs had been immaculate, fashionable and even faintly suggestive of ostentation. Now, though, all had gone slightly to seed. Gabled and turreted, with chipped paint and dying bushes, if seen during the day (and without the patina of snow) it was slightly ominous and more than a little shabby.

Still, on this particular night, a warm glow came from several of the windows upstairs and down. When the front door opened the sound of youthful voices wafted into the cold air bringing a hint of the good cheer of the yuletide season that blanketed the town as well as this particular house, not unlike the snow that continued to fall ever so softly.

Through the open door several people made their separate ways to cars parked on the street beyond the house calling out a cheery "good-night" or "thank you" to their hosts inside.

From the other direction, moving toward the house, a girl hurried up the street, exchanging greetings with those who were leaving, then continued up the front walk and into the house. The door closed behind her; the last car pulled away and outside the mansion that was now a sorority house all was silent. Almost all.

All in there. Most of them. Smirking. I can't get my breath. Why don't they let me alone? It wasn't my fault. I didn't do that. Yes, you did. Nasty, nasty. It's cold. I should wear a coat. It's so quiet I can hear my footsteps in the snow. Crunch, crunch, crunch. They can't hear me, though. Because they're all talking, laughing. I can see them. Having a good time. Smirking. It wasn't like she said. Dirty. Nasty.

The young girl who moved across the living room was the one who

had just gone in the front door. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, her brisk walk home and from the drink she had just poured for herself at the makeshift bar in the corner beyond the Christmas tree which stood in such a way that the man outside peering in could not be seen by those inside.

As she finished her drink and began to pour another, Barbara Pollard, a not unattractive twenty-one-year-old with a deep, abiding sense of inferiority which she hid rather unsuccessfully behind a mask of derisive humor said, “You’re a bunch of shitheads! Period. No, exclamation point. I don’t really resent it exactly but I should like to remind one and all that I, little old Barb herself, was the only one over there working tonight. While the rest of you were—singing hymns?”

Turning to Phyllis Thompson and Pat Cornell who were cuddled in a corner of the couch, Barbara asked, “And where were you? Patrick? Phyl?”

Phyllis replied, “We were there this afternoon, Barb. Honest.”

“A likely story. Knowing Patrick you were probably somewhere testing mattresses.”

“I’m a straw man, Barb,” Patrick said.

“Uh-huh. A snow man, too. Has anyone ever told you that you’re oversexed?”

“Only Phyllis. But she doesn’t complain.”

“Like hell I don’t.”

Pat asked, “How’s it look, Barb?”

“Now that I have finished decorating it, their house looks yule-ish, very yule-ish.” She took a sip from her glass and then said to Patrick, “You got your outfit?”

“Picked it up today. The jolly red giant is ready to strike again. What time do the little bastards arrive tomorrow afternoon?”

The telephone rang as Barbara answered, “I’m told around one o’clock. They’re taking them to lunch first. Dessert will be served at the frat house.” The phone rang a second time as she swigged down the last of her second drink, put the glass down saying, “Ah, yes! Yes, indeedy. I’m coming, dammit.”

Before she could get there Jessica Bradley, another of the girls who lived in the house came into the room and said quietly, “It’s for you, Barb.”

“Thanks. One of my many admirers, no doubt.”

“Well, I’ll tell you this much. It’s not the creep.”

“I think it’s you he’s after, Jess. You being the beautiful one. He wouldn’t bother with Phyl.”

"Why not?" Phyllis called from across the room. "I resent that."

Barb laughed. "Because he knows you're worn out from Patrick."

As she left the room she stuck her tongue out at Phyllis.

Why are they laughing at me? I didn't mean to. Where did she go? I wish I could hear them. It must be warm inside. Maybe if I went to another window. No, I'll go back up there . . . and wait. I've got to talk to one of them. I can't help it. I have to. Don't they know how hard it is? It isn't right for them to be so happy. I didn't do what she said. Nasty. Nasty. Easy, now. Quiet. It's warm up there, but I have to be quiet.

Bright moonlight came through the dirt-encrusted windows of the attic, casting grotesque shadows across forgotten treasures, discarded and useless furniture, trunks, suitcases, a rocking horse, a dollhouse and a number of half-broken dolls. In one corner was a mattress, mildewed, stained, musty but giving evidence of use for there were rags on top of it obviously used for warmth, and a pan with some half-eaten and half-rotted food sat beside it. It was not an untypical attic yet there was something more about it, something that could only be described as sickeningly evil, a mute testimony that whoever was living there was somehow depraved.

The voices from below were in stark contrast to the cast of the room. The trap door was lifted and the sounds became clearer.

Barbara Pollard was holding the telephone in her hand about to take it and its long extension cord into the hall where she would be able to hear better. "Hey!" she called, "keep it down, will you? I can't hear a damn thing. If it's a proposal—or even a proposition—I want to be in a position to know what I'm agreeing to."

She could not be seen from the attic but by coming down the stairs onto the second floor one could look down to the first and the hallway where she was holding the telephone close to her ear.

"Yes, Mother, I can hear you now. What? Oh, just a little Christmas party. Some of the kids. We invited some friends over. Actually I wasn't here. I was working, getting the stuff ready for tomorrow for the little number we do for the deserving poor. I told you about it last time. Yes, I've had a couple . . . Oh, come on, Mother. I am definitely not drunk. For Crissakes, yes, I *have* been smoking a little. This isn't a convent."

As her mother rambled on Barbara sighed and took another large swig from the glass she had brought in with her.

Finally, when she heard a pause she said, "Yes, I remember my asthma, Mother. With you around, how could I ever forget it?"

Looking into the mirror over the hall table she made a face. Then

she pushed her hair back and pulled at the skin around her eyes, ran her tongue over her lips before moving away so that she could check out her figure. This was followed by another swallow from the glass, then a respite from the voice on the other end. Quickly she said, "Yeah, like I told you I have to do something tomorrow afternoon and then I'm taking the seven twenty train to the city."

I hate the telephone. It frightens me when I pick it up. I want to see people when I talk to them, but I'm afraid. Asthma. She said she has asthma. Maybe that's what . . . Her hair is beautiful. Too bad she's . . . She shouldn't talk that way to her mother. Nasty, nasty.

"What, Mother! Oh, come on, you've got to be kidding, well, why couldn't I come with you? Who? Who the hell is *he?* A new one? Oh, Christ, Mother! You're a real gold-plated whore, you know that! Rude! I was trying to be a bit more than rude, Mother. Well, when is he coming? I mean, when is he appearing? Jesus, what a merry Christmas!"

The front door opened and Clare Harrison came into the hall with a well-built, athletic-looking young man. Clare called past Barbara to the others in the living room, "Hi! I'm back." She turned to the young man and said, "Good-night, Chris. I'll miss you."

"Me too. See you next week. Have a good time."

"You, too. Call before you come. I'll have to get my parents used to the idea." She kissed him lightly on the lips, watched him out the door, nodded to Barbara who was still listening to her mother's involved explanations over the telephone, then went into the living room.

Barbara was saying, "Yes, Jess and a couple of the others might like to go skiing. They could come up, after, as long as he won't be there. Maybe. Okay, sure."

From the hall Jessica watched compassionately; Barbara's relationship with her mother was an old story.

After exchanging greetings with Clare, Patrick and Phyllis pushed past Jessica into the hall where Barb turned her back and lowered her voice to finish her conversation with her mother. Upstairs the attention was turned to the young couple standing in the doorway as Patrick called outside.

"Hey, wait up, Chris. I'll give you a ride."

"Keep it down, will you," Barb said. "I can't hear myself think."

Through the mirror she watched Patrick take Phyllis into his arms and kiss her passionately, running his hands down her back and into her slacks. She wriggled for a moment, then pulled away in mock

anger.

“Jesus, Patrick!”

“What’s the matter? Why don’t you ever take me seriously?”

“Because you’re an idiot. What will Barb think?”

“That I’m sexy.”

“Yeah. A sexy idiot. Now beat it.”

He grimaced as he said, “I guess I’ll have to.” Then, laughing at his own bad joke he attempted to put his arms around her again.

Firmly she said, “Goodbye, Patrick!” She closed the door in his face and turned to Barbara saying, “A madman with a one-track mind. Excuse me.”

“That’s all right. I’m just hanging up.” Together the two girls went back into the living room as upstairs the figure moved softly into one of the bedrooms.

A cat, sitting on the bed, licking its fur, looked up at the intrusion and scampered away and down the hall. The room was dim but not totally in blackness as one bedside lamp, left on to keep the cat company, burned beside a framed photograph, brown with age, of two young girls dressed theatrically and standing beside a placard on an easel that read, MacHENRY SISTERS—SONG AND DANCE.

Between the lamp and the picture was a telephone, and on the window next to the table, frilly curtains stirred slightly from a breeze that came through the small opening where the window had been cracked to allow a little fresh air into the overheated room. Carefully the figure looked about, then sat on the bed.

Nasty Billy. Just because I liked her hair. I didn’t do anything wrong. It isn’t fair. Why don’t you let me alone? I promise I won’t, but don’t make me do it. Please don’t make me do that. It hurts and I can’t breathe. Oh, please, please stop. Stop!

CHAPTER TWO

Carrying the telephone to its place on the table just inside the door of the living room, Barbara looked annoyed. The chattering of the other three girls, Phyllis, Jessica and Clare was irksome, but she finished her drink and then crossed the room, interrupting their conversation.

To Jess she said, “You feel like going skiing for a few days?”

Uncomfortable, Jess looked at Phyl, then ducked her head, saying, “Sure, Barb, Why not? When?”

“Uh, two or three days. My mother has taken a place up at Mount Holly. Then she’s going . . . on a trip. Anybody else want to come? We can make a party out of it.”

After an awkward pause, Phyl said, “I will, Barb. Sure.”

“Great.” Almost defiantly she said to Clare who was passing by her on the way to the kitchen with several glasses and a dirty ashtray, “Who else? How about you, Clare?”

“Thanks, Barb, but I’ve made other plans.”

“Christmas, sure. But the whole vacation? For a couple of days. We won’t corrupt you.”

Clare smiled. “I’m sure you won’t. But I can’t. My father is picking me up tomorrow and then he’s driving me home. It will be a big family thing.”

“For the whole two weeks?”

“More or less. I’ve got lots of relatives nearby. Thank you, really, Barb. I mean it. But I can’t.”

Irritated by the refusal, although Clare was not being unpleasant, Barb poured herself another drink, added ice and said, “It won’t cost anything.”

“No. I think my parents,” she hesitated a moment, “want me to spend the whole holiday with them.” She turned and went through the door that led to the kitchen.

When she was gone and the door had closed, Barbara said, “There goes the only broad in the whole school whose parents sent her here because it’s supposed to be a religious college. Hah! If they only knew.”

There was an embarrassed silence, a long, awkward moment that was finally broken by the ringing of the telephone. Jess stood up quickly, saying, “I’ll get it. It’s probably Peter.”

She picked up the phone, saying, “Hello.” When there was no sound from the other end of the line she repeated, “Hello? Hello!”

She was about to hang up when she heard a moaning sound from the other end of the line. She covered the receiver with her hand and called over to the others, “Hey, quiet. It’s him again. The moaner.”

She held the phone up and Phyl and Barb hurried across the room, gathering in a semi-circle to listen.

There was another moan, a low, wailing sound that suggested a wounded animal. At the same time each of the girls felt another thing, too, a kind of creeping of the flesh caused by an insane sexuality about the cry, as though the animal-human were in some sort of orgiastic death-throes. It was chilling and disgusting but so fascinating that none of them, including Clare, who had just come in from the kitchen, could tear themselves away.

Suddenly the moaning stopped and the caller launched into a series of strange voices, calling out as if in a nightmare, twisted, bent, revolting.

“Don’t do that to me. Not that. Do you hear me, I can’t stand it.” Then his voice changed and it was almost as if another person was present, a woman whose sharpness was the antithesis of his orgasmic moaning and vocal writhing. “Nasty Billy. Don’t ever do that again. This will teach you. Do you hear me. What you did was bad. You’re bad, bad, nasty Billy.”

What had been almost humorous to them up until now took on a new shape and form. It was a genuine psychotic who was on the telephone, of that they were all sure. There was no way to feel pity for the disturbed being at the other end of the line, only fear and loathing.

All of them were frightened, genuinely frightened, but it was Barbara who covered it up the best.

Contempuously she said, “He’s expanded his act. Mr. Porno himself. What a sicko.”

Clare said, “Could that be one person?”

As Barb took the phone from Jessica’s hand she said, “One person? No, Clare, that’s the Mormon Tabernacle Choir with their Annual Christmas Obscene Phone Call and Financial Appeal. Shall we hear more?”

“Sh!” Phyl said.

Barb shrugged. “The girl wants to hear more. Maybe it’s the way Patrick sounds when they’re alone.”

“Knock off the wisecracks, Barb.”

Before they could continue their argument the caller began a stream

of invectives, so graphic and so vulgar that even Barbara was nonplussed. She was about to hang up when the words stopped and the mad moaning began anew, this time even more intense and ugly.

She had just had enough to drink, she was just angry enough at her mother and just upset enough by the caller that she could not control herself. Pulling the phone to her head she screamed into it, “Listen you pervert, you sicko fag or whatever you are, why don’t you call the Lamba Chi’s. They’re so uptight they could use a little of this.”

There was a nervous giggle from Clare and Phyllis while Jessica tried to wrest the phone from Barbara’s hand. The caller on the other end of the line was silent and this seemed to provoke Barbara more.

“You creep. You stinking little creep. You get your rocks off scaring girls on the phone. You’d probably run the other way if you met a real woman. What’s the matter, can’t you get it up!”

The silence at the other end held for a moment, then a quiet, low, sickening voice replied evenly, “I’m going to kill you.”

The girls looked to one another and then Barbara, in a mixture of fear and revulsion, said in a cold, vicious voice, “Why don’t you find a wall socket and stick your *tongue* in it. That’ll give you a charge, you creep!”

The line went dead in her hand and she looked at the other girls who stood shocked and stunned while she put the receiver back on the cradle.

“Super tongue,” Phyl said, referring to Barbara, “strikes again.”

Flippantly Barbara replied, “Fastest tongue in the west. In or out of wall sockets.”

“God, how disgusting,” Jess said. “That was really sick.”

“What I said. A real sicko. I’m going to have another drink.”

“I don’t think you should provoke somebody like that, Barb,” Clare said.

“Are you kidding? In the city I get about two of those a day. This guy’s a busher, strickly minor league. Christ, what does he know about fancy—”

Clare interrupted her. “All the same, a couple of weeks ago a girl in town was raped.”

“Clare. You can’t *rape* a townie.”

There was a pause before Clare said, “You really are too much.”

Defensively Barbara replied, “Listen, kid, this is a sorority house. Like I told dear old mom, it’s not a convent!”

Mildly annoyed but determined not to get into a further argument with Barbara who she could tell had had too much to drink too fast,

Clare said, "I've got to pack. See you later."

When she was gone Jess gave Barbara an angry look and followed Clare into the hall, stopping her at the foot of the stairs.

"Clare," she called. "Don't pay any attention to her. Come on, she didn't mean anything by it."

"I know. It's just Barb. Only sometimes I get tired of the needle, that's all. But I'm not angry or hurt, really. It's okay, honest. I just have to finish packing."

Jessica watched her walk up the stairs before she moved back to the other room. Barbara was at the bar and Jess went to her saying, "Hasn't she had enough trouble fitting in here without you getting at her all the time?"

"I know a professional virgin when I see one."

"Professional?"

"Sure. She's always advertising her wares. Something to sell—for marriage. That's why she advertises. And speaking of professionals, not the virginal kind, however—here comes the Queen of Vaudeville. Circa eighteen sixty-one or thereabouts." In a loud voice, trumpeting she said, "Ta-daaaaaaa."

At Barbara's announcement they all turned to watch Mrs. MacHenry, their house mother, come bustling into the room carrying an armload of packages. A woman in her late fifties, she dressed as though she was thirty. No doubt it was due to her theatrical upbringing, for it was her room in which the picture of the two girls sat, said picture being of her and her deceased sister. Myrtle and Maude McHenry had been a third-rate vaudeville act which had toured the country. Third-rate or not, they had found work for a number of years before motion pictures successfully retired them and in an alcoholic haze she saw those years as being far better, more glamorous and more prosperous than they had really been. So she lived in the past while at the same time playing sycophant to all of "her girls," as she called them, as well as to the college authorities.

She always seemed to have a smile and good word, though under her breath but just loud enough to hear if the listener were not a threat she would comment disparagingly on all the world and all that took place in it. She was concerned with propriety and proper conduct, but it was a surface concern. She really could not have cared less what the girls under her charge did—as long as there were no scandals or repercussions. In other words, she got along with everyone in order not to jeopardize her comfortable existence.

She made, from time to time, a great fuss about the rules, but it was a game that the girls soon caught onto; mostly they played along with her. Smiling and fawning to one and all she secretly detested almost

everyone in the college and all of the girls in the sorority house. Her words were often clever and biting but she was usually careful not to go too far. Her drinking was well-known by the girls and they took pleasure in trying to catch her at it. She was really ingenious at hiding her bottles of sherry and nipping at them when no one was looking.

“Looks like Santa’s here,” Barb said.

“Where’ve you been, Mrs. Mac?” Jess asked.

“Shopping! Last minute shopping. Serves me right for waiting. Oh, my God, the people who are buyers for these shops must take tacky lessons. I’ve never seen such garbage in all my life. And the prices . . .” She raised her eyes to the heavens in a practised vaudeville gesture.

Jessica and Phyllis took the packages from her hands and put them on a nearby table. Barbara handed her a glass of eggnog and said, “Well, drink this down. We apologize, there’s a bit of alcohol in it. Not much, of course. Just to keep us warm. We know you can’t approve.”

“Well, just this once, since it’s Christmas, the season to be jolly and friendly and all of that.”

As Mrs. Mac gulped down the drink, Barbara said, “Speaking of that, we just had best wishes from old St. Nick himself and all his bloody reindeer.”

“Huh, what’s that, dear?”

“Oh, nothing important. Just our gentleman caller going ‘ho-ho-ho’ for the benefit of one and all. I invited him over but he said he had other stops to make first with little bits of happiness for all and sundry.”

“Oh, God, Barbara, will you stop!” Jessica pleaded.

“Okay, but what d’ya say? Shall we give Mrs. Mac her present?”

“I should get Clare.”

“She’s packing, remember. Come on, I want to see her face. And maybe she’ll wear it tonight, model it for us.”

So as Clare, upstairs, prepared to pack for her journey the next day, the party downstairs picked up, growing noisy enough so that she would not be heard when she most needed to be.

CHAPTER THREE

Clare, as she moved across her room toward the closet where her suitcase was sitting on the floor ready to be packed, noticed an object on her bed. She switched on the light and Claude, Mrs. Mac's cat, looked up lazily, stretched his hind legs and rolled his shoulders suggestively.

"There you are, Claude. Mrs. Mac's been looking all over for you. She thought you'd run away."

She picked up the cat and was allowed by an indifferent Claude to cradle it in her arms for a moment before he leaped away and began to prowl the room. Clare shrugged and reached into the closet, dragging the suitcase to her bed where she lifted and opened it preparatory to putting in the clothes that were already stacked on the far end of the bed. Claude had been sleeping on them. Once the small things were packed she flipped the center divider and went to the closet to get out her dresses, opening the door wider. From downstairs she could hear the shrieks of the girls and Mrs. Mac, and she divined that they were giving her that absurd present, the one that she had been opposed to their buying.

The dresses were on hangers and she swept them all out, leaving a clear plastic bag, the kind that dry-cleaning establishments use to cover freshly laundered items, hanging empty and rather forlorn in the large closet.

Carefully she packed the dresses, folding them neatly on the hangers provided in the suitcase. Suddenly she stopped, straightened up, listening. There was a puzzled look on her face. She turned and looked at the closet. There was a low, moaning sound coming from inside it, a strange, disturbing noise that she could not quite fathom.

As she walked toward it she said, "Who's that? Is that you, Claude? Now, I don't want you to get locked in the closet or Mrs. Mac will never find you. Come out of there."

As she edged closer the sound grew. There was light in the room but the closet door cut it off. She reached up and turned on a single lamp on her dresser so that some of that light filtered into the recesses of the closet. As the moaning grew louder she peered in saying softly, "Claude. Come out of there. You're bad."

The moaning stopped and Clare leaned forward, not sure of what it was she thought she saw through the plastic bag. Pulling the bag to the side her face contorted in horror. Before she could scream a hand

came forward and swept the bag across her face. Struggling, she tried to scream but the hand held her in a death-grip. For a moment she could hear the crinkling of the bag mixed with the sound of the girls downstairs who all seemed to be talking at once at the top of their voices.

There was a squeal from Mrs. Mac as she pulled the ribbon free and opened the fancy blue box, tore aside the tissue paper and held up the rather daring nightgown that was the box's contents.

"Oh, girls, it's lovely." She held it up in front of herself, pirouetting around the room as a high-fashion model might. When she reached the far corner, she said so that she couldn't be heard, "I've got about as much use for this as I've got for a chastity belt." Then she flounced back, swaying her hips and rolling her eyes.

They had heard her words but they pretended that they hadn't, suppressing as best they could their laughter.

Barbara began to chant and the others quickly joined in, "Put it on! Put it on!"

"Well, that's better than hearing 'Take it off! Take it off!' " Mrs. Mac took off her hat and carefully slipped the gown on over her dress. Then she pranced around again, grotesquely mock-sexy.

Jess said, "Do the opening for us, Mrs. Mac."

"Oh, no! I couldn't."

"Oh, go ahead," Barbara said, winking at the others. "It's really a treat for us. After all, we've heard about vaudeville, but we've never seen it. Go on."

The entreaties continued. Phyl said, "Come on, Mrs. Mac. You haven't done it for months."

It was clear that the old lady liked to be coaxed into doing the introduction to the act she and her sister Myrtle had presented so many years before. And the girls were used to doing the coaxing.

"No! No! No!" she said. "I'm too tired. I'm an old lady."

"No you're not, Mrs. Mac," Jess said. "You're only as old as you feel and act. Come on, do it for us."

"Please," Phyllis said.

"Yeah, please," came from Barbara who was already mixing herself another drink.

Finally she consented and went to one of the windows where she half-hid herself behind one of the draperies. The girls, once she was out of sight, began to applaud, giving her a cue to make her entrance.

First a chubby leg came sliding out from behind the curtain and after it wriggled and received more applause, Mrs. Mac herself appeared, sasshaying in a ludicrous parody of what must have been

something of a parody long before.

She broke into a soft-shoe routine as the girls clapped rhythmically until she finished with a flourish, her arm outstretched.

A little breathless she began the patter of the old routine.

Hi there, America. We're here to give you the facts.
I'm Myrtle, I'm Maude. We're known as the Macs.
We sing, we dance, we set a lovely pace;
A joke, a grind, an occasional funny face.

Barbara sprawled out on the couch. It was obvious that she was already quite drunk. Sotto voce, and to no one in particular she said, referring to Mrs. Mac, "Now I know what killed vaudeville."

Jessica, who was standing near her and heard what she said, replied, "It must have died in agony."

They tried once more to contain their laughter as Mrs. Mac continued with her performance, bumping and grinding across the room while upstairs, Clare's body was bumping, too, as it was dragged across the bedroom floor toward the hall.

Oh, God, what have I done? They made me do it. No, I had to punish her for calling me bad. It isn't so. I'm not bad, not nasty. She shouldn't have said those things. They're the ones who are bad. All of them. I'm going to be sick. Maybe if I can use the phone. Have to take her away first. Keep her with me up there. She'll be all right. She'll wake up and she'll be all right and she'll be sorry she said what she did. My name's not Claude. Why did she call me that? Why did she call me bad. I can't help it. But I didn't do that. I didn't!

"Get the hook," Phyllis said as Mrs. Mac finished up her number. The girls whooped and hollered and began to applaud again.

"Are you kidding," Barbara said woozily. "You need a bulldozer to get her off. And three strong men besides. Come to think of it, I could use three strong men myself."

Finally the number was finished and the girls applauded extravagantly once more as Mrs. Mac took her bows and blustered about pretending that it didn't matter to her, moving among the girls, patting them and wishing them a happy holiday.

At last she said, "Okay, party's over. Let's get this place cleaned up a little. If the dean saw this, I'd be back in vaudeville."

Under her breath, Barbara said, "C'mon, Dean!"

"What was that, dear?"

"Uh, I said, 'How is the dean?' "

“Oh, I’m sure he’s fine, dear. But I’m not sure . . . However, up we go. Time for beddy-bye for all of us.”

She reached down and helped Barbara to her feet, steered her toward the door that led to the hall. When she looked around she realized that Jess and Phyl had taken the glasses and dishes to the kitchen, leaving her temporarily alone in the living room. She watched Barbara weave down the hall toward the stairs and when she was sure the girl was out of sight she turned back, checked the door to the kitchen once more, then went quickly to the bookshelf, pulled out some books, reached behind some others and removed a half-finished bottle of sherry. She took a quick glug, then called out cheerily to the kitchen as she replaced the top and put the bottle and books back, “Oh, Jess, you girls are too good to me. It really is such a lovely present. You’re too good to me.”

Jess came back into the room and said, “Nonsense, Mrs. Mac. I’m glad you like it, that’s all. It’s you who have been good to us.”

The telephone rang and Jess paused expectantly. A long moment passed and it rang again. Phyllis walked into the room, looked at Jess, then hesitantly answered it.

“Hello?” she said, her voice quavering slightly.

“Hello. Is Jess there, please?”

Relieved, Phyllis answered. “Yes, she is, Peter.” She called into the parlor. “It’s for you, Jess. It’s Peter.”

Jess, too, was momentarily relieved. Even Mrs. Mac who had been watching the two girls, sensed that the tension she had felt before was gone.

Jessica went across the room and took the receiver from Phyl, thanking her. Then she went into the hall and said quietly, “Hello, Peter?”

“Hi. How was the party?”

“Okay. No, it was *good.* Sorry you couldn’t make it.”

“Yeah, so am I. But I had to practice. Four straight days is a little much but it will all be over soon.”

“I know. But I’ve got to see you. You’ve got to find some time so we can talk.”

Phyllis and Mrs. Mac moved past her and started up the stairs wishing her a good night. Mrs. Mac turned back and said, “Turn out the lights, dear.”

Jess nodded as she listened to Peter.

“You sound funny,” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter. I just . . . want to talk to you.”

"Well, you sound funny."

"You *said* that. I don't feel funny. I just feel tired."

"Me too. Look, why don't you tell me now?"

"Because I want to *see* you. I want to talk to you face to face. I hate telephones. They're so damned impersonal."

"Jess, honey, I haven't been to bed in three nights. I'm not in the mood to be playing guessing games."

"Don't guess. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Oh, Christ! All right. I'll be in Room Thirty all day. Practicing. Come by whenever you can."

"I can make it at two. Around then. After the party. That okay with you?"

"I said anytime, didn't I?" He paused and then apologized. "Look, I didn't mean to sound short. I guess I'm just sort of exhausted."

"Yeah. All of us are. It's the season to be exhausted. It's okay."

"Good. I love you."

"I know you do. I'll see you tomorrow."

"That's all?"

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, swell. Tomorrow. Good night."

He banged down the receiver and she leaned back against the wall, a look of distress on her face.

Upstairs the house mother, Mrs. MacHenry was brushing her teeth. She still wore the Christmas present-nightgown and she had jammed her hat back on her head slightly askew. She stared mournfully into the mirror at her mouthful of toothpaste. For a moment the gleam from her mouth reminded her of the spotlights from so many years before, her days in the limelight.

Softly she repeated almost as a litany her favorite words.

"Hi, there, America,
We're here to give you the facts.
I'm Myrtle. I'm Maude.
We're known as the Macs."

After looking at herself for a long moment, her rheumy eyes began to break out of the reverie. She made a face at herself, rinsed out her mouth, put the toothbrush away and reached into the medicine chest where another bottle of sherry was conveniently waiting. She tipped it up and washed away the taste of the toothpaste, rolling it around in her mouth before swallowing it. Then she put it back and stared down

at the frilly, youthful-looking negligee.

“Jesus, I wouldn’t wear this to have my liver out. Ah, the hell with it.”

Her hand went back into the medicine chest and removed the sherry again. For good measure she took another quick drink, a “dividend” she told herself, a nightcap.

“And so to bed.”

Switching off the light she went to her bedroom and slowly undressed.

Just above her, Clare Harrison’s body, its head swathed in the clear, plastic bag, was being moved slowly and silently across the attic floor.

The bag itself was sucked hideously into her mouth and nostrils, testimony of how desperately she had tried to get one more breath of air. Her eyes bulged out, staring vacantly at the grim room.

The body seemed to be rocking slightly as though it were cradled in someone’s arms and a child’s voice was murmuring softly to it.

Outside the light snow continued, pristine, white, and gentle, symbolic of the season, of gentleness and purity.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was still snowing the next day. Whitley College, if seen from a distance or the vantage point of the old mansion high on the hill, resembled a Currier and Ives print. It was almost too pretty, too perfect. There was activity on the streets as the denizens of the community went about their respective business while children of all ages and sizes moved about in galoshes, on skis or sleds, frolicking and playing games.

Near one of the campus buildings a distinguished-looking man in a tight grey coat and a hat paced nervously, stopping from time to time to glance at his watch. He looked up when a bus full of screaming children went by on the street near where he stood. Then he examined his watch again and resumed his pacing. From out of nowhere a snowball hurtled through the air and hit the side of his head, knocking off both his hat and glasses.

For a few seconds he didn't move although the impact, in truth, had not really stunned him. Then he leaned forward, stared at the ground and groped for his glasses. A group of children across the street ran towards one of the houses but he didn't notice them. A young man put his hand down, picked up the glasses and handed them to the gentleman.

"Thank you very much." The man adjusted the glasses, then searched out his hat.

"That's okay. I'm sorry. It was one of the kids. They were having a snowball fight and their aim isn't all that good. I'm sorry. I should have been keeping a better watch on them."

The man peered through the glasses at the youthful stranger. "Yes, I should think so."

"Yeah. Well, I said I was sorry."

The young man started back across the street where the last of the children were being shepherded into the house. Recovering himself, the older man called out. "Excuse me. I know it wasn't your fault. I wonder . . . have you got a second?"

Coming back the young man asked, "Yes?"

"I hate to bother you. I can see that you're busy, but I wonder if you could help me."

"Sure, if I can."

"You see, I was supposed to meet my daughter here at one o'clock.

My name is Harrison, by the way. And it's half past one now and she's still not here. I wonder if you know her? Her name's Clare Harrison."

"Clare Harrison? Yeah, I think so. But I haven't seen her."

"Yes. Well, she lives in a sorority house. I think it's called Kappa Gamma."

"Right. Sure. Kappa's our sister sorority. Some of the girls are over here today. But I haven't seen Clare. We're having a party, sort of. But like I said, she isn't here."

"Well, I suppose that's why I was to meet her here. She was coming right from the party. You're sure?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm positive. The Kappa house isn't far from here, though. I can show you how to get there. Maybe she wasn't feeling well or something. If you just go down this street to the next corner and turn left, there's a hill and it's at the top of the hill. The only house. You can't miss it."

On the opposite side of the campus Jessica Bradley sat on a bench in the quadrangle. She had wiped away the snow to clear herself a spot but she had been sitting long enough that she was beginning to feel the cold through her heavy, serviceable coat. She seemed to be listening for something as she sat pensively, quite still, her eyes staring straight ahead. Off in the distance she heard a clock strike two. She got up quickly and hurried into one of the nearby buildings.

"Ho, ho, ho," Santa was saying, and the little children giggled appreciatively. There were about twenty-five of them but they sounded to the college-age people in the room to be a thousand. They were everywhere at once, noisy, exuberant and extremely wearing. All of the fraternity brothers were attempting to entertain and contain them as Patrick, dressed in his red Santa Claus outfit mingled among them distributing presents. There was a large punch bowl in one corner on a long table that had trays of cookies and on the floor in a bucket beside the table sat an opened champagne bottle.

Patrick, after handing out the last present, came across the room to where Barbara was standing beside the table, a glass of champagne in one hand, a ladle for pouring punch for the children in the other.

"I never knew children in groups could be so exhausting."

"Yeah," she replied. "I'm glad I didn't choose a teaching career. Phyl should be here. It might send her into something simple like medicine."

"Speaking of Phyl," he said, lowering his voice, "what the hell do you mean, 'she's going away for a few days?' "

Gesturing at the children Barbara said, "Naughty Santa. Mustn't swear."

“She’s supposed to be going away with *me.”* He filled a cup with champagne. “Damn it to hell!”

Barbara smiled at a small boy who had come by holding his cup aloft. “Here, honey. Let Barb give you some more of that delicious punch. Won’t make you a bit drunky-poo at all.” When the child had left she said to Patrick, “Some of us decided to go skiing for a few days. Right after merry old X-mas.” She took another drink of champagne and then added, laughingly, “I suspect she knew what you had in mind for her and decided skiing was more restful.”

Bitterly he replied, “Ho, ho, ho. Look, Barb, she promised me! All term I’ve been looking forward to spending a few days alone with her. Christ, what am I supposed to do? Sit around and study all holiday?” A little girl had come up behind him and he didn’t see her as he added, “What a bitch!”

The little girl looked wide-eyed and Barbara said to her, “Isn’t Santa naughty. Bad, bad Santa. Here, have some punch. And I’ll give Santa something to wash out his mouth.”

By the time she had ladled the punch into a glass for the little girl Patrick had stomped across the room leaving her alone. She shrugged and poured herself some more from the champagne bottle.

At the Kappa Gamma house Mr. Harrison and Mrs. MacHenry were standing in Clare’s room, staring into her empty closet. The suitcase sat on the bed where she had left it and the room showed no signs of anything untoward happening.

“Well, Mr. Harrison, her clothes are all packed and ready to go, so she couldn’t have gone far.” She closed the closet door and surveyed the room. “I just don’t know. Maybe she went over to Delta Chi. There’s a party there today for underprivileged children.” She was wishing to herself that she had never answered the front door. He was a pompous man, she decided on first seeing him and nothing so far in their tenuous relationship had done anything to change her mind. Besides, she was in a hurry. It was those damned girls. They were forever spending the night where they shouldn’t have been, and the parents acted as if the world had come to an end.

Mr. Harrison lifted a glass on the night table and sniffed at it as he said, “Yes, I know. I was to meet her near there. A young man who is a member of the fraternity directed me here. He said she had not come to the party. Is there alcohol in this glass?”

“We had a party last night. The girls did. They made a punch. I daresay it had a small amount of alcohol in it. A little Christmas cheer, you might say.”

“Mrs. MacHenry, I never was in agreement with Clare’s staying in a sorority house. I was afraid the atmosphere would be too lax. As

house mother, isn't it your responsibility to keep control over the girls' activities?"

Obsequiously she replied, "Well, I try to do my best, Mr. Harrison." (To herself she added, "you old fraud.") "But they're all young women with minds of their own and I don't like to restrict them too much. I mean times are different than when you and I were growing up." Good thing he wasn't around vaudeville. Times aren't different at all, as far as I can tell.

"I'm very disappointed in the atmosphere my daughter is living in, Mrs. MacHenry, and I intend to do something about it." He rummaged through the suitcase and pulled out a photograph of Chris. "And who, may I ask, is this?"

As she led him out of the room, Mrs. Mac said, "Oh, that's a friend of Clare, a very nice young man from the town, Chris Hayden. He's on the hockey team."

Mr. Harrison sniffed. "Hockey!" Distressed, he put the picture back in the suitcase and walked past Mrs. MacHenry into the hall. She look disdainfully at his back then started to follow him.

As they walked to the top of the stairway he said, "I was under the impression that this was a religious college, and I didn't send my daughter here to be drinking and picking up boys."

"Clare is a good girl, Mr. Harrison. You should have no doubt about that. She's a good girl and wouldn't do anything wrong. Uh, I'm sure you'll find her. Probably she got to the fraternity party late. Why don't you try back there?"

When he nodded his head in assent she added quickly, "I have to go that way to the store, so if you wouldn't mind giving me a lift, I could show you."

"I know the way, thank you." Then perhaps realizing that he was being overly rude he added, "but I'd be happy to give you a ride."

"Wonderful. I'll just get my bag. Won't be a minute."

He started down the stairs and she went back down the hall to her room. She closed the door behind her and then deliberately slowed down, stopping at the mirror to fuss with her hair, muttering to herself sarcastically, imitating his flat, sing-song way of speaking: "I thought this was supposed to be a religious college."

From the drawer of her vanity she removed still another bottle of sherry and took a long, slow drink. After putting the bottle back she carefully pinned on her hat, although the effect was that of her simply having stuck it there. She continued to mutter to herself. "Am I supposed to be responsible for the morality of every girl in this goddamn house? Fat chance." She shook her head and went back to

the vanity. Spitefully she took another drink and said, “Those broads would hump the Leaning Tower of Pisa if they could get up there. I do my best,” she added, speaking to the door, “I don’t know what the bastards expect.”

Looking around she found her purse, opened it and dug out her lipstick. She had applied it to half of her mouth when she heard a familiar sound. Moving out into the hallway she called, “Claude! Here kitty, kitty, kitty. Come say goodbye to mommykins.”

Stopping, she looked around puzzled, trying to discover the source of the sound. Shaking her head she moved farther down the hall. “Here pretty Claude. Come to mommy. Here kitty, kitty, kitty.”

She stopped and listened for the sound seemed to be coming from below. Bending over to listen she accidentally spilled the contents of her purse onto the floor. Awkwardly she leaned down to pick up the things and did not notice the form that came to the top of the stairs.

“Dammit, Claude,” she mumbled. “Where are you? You’ve made me spill the whole damn thing over the floor. Kitty! Kitty! Kitty! Come on Claude. You little prick!”

There was a slight cough and she looked up to see Clare’s father standing at the head of the stairs, looking at her. With her lipstick half on and her strange hat perched on top of her head she made a ridiculous picture, he thought.

She stared at him blankly for a moment then broke into a toothy smile.

“This is very kind of you, Mr. Harrison.”

He stared back, slightly numbed by the sight of her. “Think nothing of it,” he said. “Let me help you.”

“No, I’ve got it all. Thanks just the same.”

“Very well. I’ll wait for you downstairs.” He turned and hurried away. She watched him go and when his back was out of sight she scrambled to her feet and made an obscene gesture with her free hand.

Claude bounced from the old chest to the attic window and watched her and Mr. Harrison walking down the walk toward the car parked in front. He mewed several times, then turned his attention back to the room as Mrs. Mac was helped into the car and driven away.

He leaped back down and began to paw at the piece of plastic that was covering a human face.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Romantic, almost Wagnerian music penetrated the entire building, even seeped through the walls to the outside where Jess pushed open a door and hurried down the austere hallway with the pale-blue walls, her shoes clicking on the bare floor, keeping an off-tempo time with the music. As she walked the music grew louder and when she turned the corner to stop just outside of Room 30 it was almost explosive.

Looking around she saw that there was no one in sight. She took a deep breath and opened the door as Peter finished off the piece with a flourish, his face strained and sweating.

Spent, as though he had just finished a grueling cross-country race, he looked up and smiled at her, saying breathlessly, "How about that? Did you hear it all? I finally got it right. No, not right. Perfect. How are you?"

Diffidently she stood at the end of the piano biting her lip.

"Well, are you going to say something? Was it great or wasn't it?"

"Peter, I'm pregnant." Her voice was flat, tight and contained.

His reaction was totally unexpected. "Jess! That's fantastic." He stood up and went to her, put his arms around her. When she remained stiff and unpliable he added, a little embarrassed, "Well, that's great."

Quietly but firmly she said, "I don't want it."

She turned away so that her back was to him while his arms remained around her.

"You don't want it?"

"No. I'm going to have an . . . I'm going to have it terminated."

Fighting to control his rising anger, Peter asked, "How can you make a decision like that? I mean, the responsibility belongs to both of us. You can't decide alone. You haven't even asked me."

"There's nothing to ask. It affects me, not you. Truthfully, I wasn't even going to tell you."

He paused, swallowed hard, getting his breathing to slow down and his hands to stop shaking before he said, "Jess, I want you to have that baby."

"I'm sorry, Peter. I can't."

"For God's sake, Jess! I'm willing to have it. I *want* it. This is like

some absurd futuristic movie where the man wants the baby and the woman doesn't. We're the ones who are supposed to suggest abortion while the woman weeps softly in the corner."

"I'm sorry, Peter, but that's the way it is."

"Don't you ever consider anyone but yourself?"

"I've thought this out very carefully and I know what I'm going to do."

"Then why the hell tell me!"

"It was a mistake. I thought I owed it to you. I even thought you might agree."

"Well, I don't. Jess, do you know how important this afternoon is to me?"

"Yes, I do, which is one reason why I contemplated not telling you."

"Oh, damn. Damn! Why don't you just get out of here."

She looked at him for a moment, turned on her heel and crossed the room. Before she could get out the door, across the length of the practice hall he called out to her.

"I want to talk to you some more about this tonight."

"There's really nothing to discuss, Peter."

"I think there is!"

"I'm not going to change my mind."

"We'll see. Will you be home at nine o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Don't . . . don't do anything until after I talk to you."

"Don't worry. Even *I'm* offended by the idea of doing it on Christmas Eve."

"Okay. I'll see you then."

"All right." She walked out of the room and closed the door gently behind her. He sat down at the piano thoughtfully. After looking at his watch he began to play a difficult passage from the piece he was studying, a slow, romantic movement in contrast to the wild abandon of the finish. Totally involved in the music he listened to the tone and beauty of the work as he played until his fingers struck a discordant note. It brought him back to life, to the reality of his conversation with the woman he loved.

He slammed his hands down hard on the piano and the discord reverberated through the hall.

Mr. Harrison looked and felt uncomfortable and out of place in the small room off the hall of the fraternity house. He was shouting over the telephone in order to be heard over the children who were busy putting on their coats and galoshes and screaming out goodbyes to

one another and to their new-found friends.

Barbara, still with a champagne glass in her hand, stood just inside the door, leaning against the wall, watching him.

"Yes, dear. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Yes, I've just been talking with a friend of hers, and she's going to call around for me." As he listened to his wife he eyed Barbara apprehensively as she slumped unsteadily, her eyes glazed over. "Yes, well, I'm not sure. No, I don't think we'll be home early this evening. The snow is still coming down and it's a bit late to head out now."

In the next room, Phyl too, was leaning against the wall. Her arms were crossed in front of her and Santa Claus was kissing her passionately on the mouth while his hands groped behind her, finding her bottom. Barbara slipped from the small room and began to shepherd some of the children who were lingering toward the door. As she came around the corner she saw Phyl and Patrick and could not fail to note Patrick's hand placement.

"Jesus, they ought to call you Santa Crotch, instead of Santa Claus."

The kids skipped merrily by, one or two tentatively eying Santa and the girl who was obviously not Mrs. Claus.

Phyl said, after pulling her mouth away from his, "You're going to blow your image, Santa."

In a husky voice he said, "Say you're not going away skiing. Go ahead, say it."

"You're not going away skiing."

"Oh, come on, Phyl. What's going on, anyway. You promised me." He pulled his beard down and kissed her again, even more urgently than before.

"I've got a place in the hills not far from here. Ski slopes, a fireplace. Warm, toasty. You'll love it." Nibbling on her earlobe he added, "I love you."

Phyl reached up and pulled down the elastic of his false beard, stretching it away from his chin. "I love you, too, but it will have to wait." She kissed him tenderly but he responded even more passionately than before. She pulled quickly away, letting the beard go with a snap against his nose.

"Ouch!" he said, and released her. She ducked away and went to the door to help Barbara while he rubbed his nose. A last child went by and looked up at him curiously. He growled at the child who stopped and continued to stare at him.

"Beat it, kid!"

The boy's face began to pucker and then he started to cry.

"Oh, Christ!" Patrick said and he turned and went quickly out of the

room to change back into his own clothes.

Down the hall from where he had been rehearsing, Peter Smythe stood in a phone booth trying to support the receiver on his shoulder as he finished dialing while tying his tie. He stopped, listened, fidgeted and tapped his foot as the mechanism rang several times. There was no answer. He looked at his watch, put the receiver back angrily, stepped into the hall, heard the coin drop, went back for it and, still preoccupied, went down the corridor.

Another student passed him and called out, “Good luck, Peter.”

Bringing his attention back in focus he answered, “Oh, uh, thanks, Allan.” Then he crossed back to the practice studio still fussing with his necktie.

When she got home she was flustered and shaking from her confrontation with Peter so Jess decided to take a bath to calm herself. She ran the water in the tub of the bathroom that she shared with the other girls and, in her slip, brought her towel, washcloth and robe into the bathroom, closing and latching the door. The large mirror was steaming up but she could see to pin her long hair up and out of the way. After she had finished doing that she looked down curiously at her body.

Quickly she grabbed the towel and wiped the steam from the mirror then stripped off her slip, bra and panties and stared curiously at her stomach, running her hands over it several times. She shook her head sharply, confirming a definite ‘no’ as the telephone started to ring.

Grabbing her robe she pulled it on and hurried down the hall to the stairs, taking them two at a time as the phone continued to ring.

“Hello. Hello!”

There was silence which she broke by saying again, “Hello,” and then, “Oh, hell, not again!”

Suddenly there was a woman’s voice, raspy and vile.

“Billy!” it said sharply.

“Billy? I’m sorry there’s no Billy here. You must have the wrong number.”

She was about to hang up when the voice said again, “Billy? I know you’re there, nasty Billy. You answer me this minute.”

“Look, you’ve got the wrong number.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know what you did, nasty Billy!”

Puzzled, still not realizing that it was the caller, Jess said, “Look, I’m telling you, you have the wrong number.”

Quickly the voice changed from that of a woman to something that

was almost sub-human, uttering the most sickening and disgusting epithet that Jess had ever heard. She slammed down the phone involuntarily, a shudder running up her back. She stood there for a moment not sure what to do when she was startled almost out of her wits by a loud banging sound.

After she had jumped she realized that the sound came from the front hall and she looked out to see through the elaborate, frosted glass window of the front door a figure distorted out of recognition. The door banged again and Jess went to it.

She struggled to open it for the catch continually stuck and when she finally was able to get it free she pulled it back to see Mrs. MacHenry standing there, her arms loaded with two brown paper bags.

"Oh, here, Mrs. Mac. Let me help you." She took one of the bags and started toward the kitchen with Mrs. Mac following her.

"Brought you girls some groceries. Just staples mostly. Lord, prices are high. Thanks for letting me in. We've got to get someone over here to fix that door. Mr. Reynolds promised to do it." Under her breath she muttered "I must have called that son of a bitch a dozen times about it."

In the kitchen they set the bags down on the counter and began to unpack them. Mrs. Mac unloaded a few things before she noticed that she was still wearing her coat so she started back to the hall to hang it up when Jess called to her, "Oh, Mrs. Mac? There was another of those calls just now. You know . . ."

From the hall, Mrs. Mac's voice floated back. "Oh, was there, dear?"

"It was crazy. Some woman then a man wailing and saying terrible things."

Mrs. Mac, having finished hanging up her coat, tiptoed into the living room and removed the hidden sherry bottle from behind the books on the shelf as she shouted back, "It's probably just one of your boyfriends, trying to tease you." After swallowing the sherry and replacing the bottle she slipped out of the room again calling out to Jess. "Clare Harrison's father was here today."

"Oh. I'm sorry I didn't get to say goodbye to her."

In the dining room Mrs. MacHenry opened a cabinet door and peered in. She couldn't see what she wanted so she reached her hand in, fishing as she carried on the loud dialogue with Jess. "Well, you still might. Clare didn't meet him where she was supposed to." Under her breath she said, "Goddam it, I know I put it there. Where the hell is it?"

When Mrs. Mac told her that Clare had not shown up to meet her

father Jess stopped putting the groceries away and thought for a moment before she yelled to Mrs. Mac, “Well, do you know where she is?”

“I thought she probably went over to the fraternity house. You know, for the party.”

Resuming with the groceries, Jess said, “Oh, yeah? Maybe she did. I wasn’t there. Did you send him over there?”

Finding what she was looking for, Mrs. Mac muttered, “Oh, there you are.” To Jess she called out, “Yes. He drove me to the store. I pointed it out. But she still has to come back for her things. That’s why I said you might get to say goodbye.” She took out the sherry bottle and took a quick drink, saying to it, “I knew you were in there.” She replaced the bottle and headed for the kitchen. At the doorway she said to Jess whose back was turned, “Have you seen Claude?” She cleared her throat from the bite of the sherry and added, “That cat, that damned cat is missing again. I haven’t seen him for twenty-four hours. God only knows what he’s doing, but I can guess. I should have had him fixed.”

She didn’t notice Jess wince for she had turned away and was starting through the house calling out sweetly, “Here, kitty. Here, Claude. Claude, kitty, here baby, where are you?”

CHAPTER SIX

The local police station was festooned with Christmas decorations which somehow added not a drop of cheer to its rather austere interior. They made it look even more forlorn and cheerless. Mr. Harrison was trying not to think of the decorations, though, as he attempted to explain to the sergeant on duty about his missing daughter. Phyllis and Barbara were with him but, he noted bitterly, Barbara was less than any help and should have been, in his opinion, arrested and confined to the drunk tank that he had been told all small-town police stations had in readiness for the inevitable Saturday night.

"What are you going to do about this?" he was saying, trying to keep his voice from becoming high-pitched, yet wanting to be heard over the two girls, especially Barbara, who was becoming, along with everything else, obstreperous. If she were my daughter, he told himself . . . Well, some other time.

"We called there," Phyllis was saying in answer to a question. "All I know for certain is that she is not at the sorority house and never showed up at the fraternity house."

"Nobody's seen her since last night," Barbara said, leering as she spoke.

"Please," Mr. Harrison said, "just a minute, girls. Now, what's the procedure?"

Ignoring him Barbara said, "Yeah, what's the procedure, General."

Irritated and getting nothing accomplished the sergeant shouted, "Quiet!" When they all suddenly stopped talking he lowered his voice and added, "Could you just give it to me one at a time?"

Rudely Barbara said, "Well, what the hell good would it do? What we want to know is what you're going to do about it?"

"Nothing, until *you* shut up," he answered in kind, pointing at her.

"For a public servant, your attitude stinks. I think you should—"

Eyeing her sternly he said, "Shut up!"

When his words finally had the desired effect of getting her to be still he turned to Mr. Harrison. "Now, sir, uh, Mr. Harrison? If you're convinced your daughter's missing, you can fill out one of these forms." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a file folder containing a sheaf of papers. Leafing through it he found the one he wanted and put it on the counter. Then he said, "I don't know if it'll

be any consolation but ninety percent of the time girls are missing from college, or have been reported missing, they've been off somewhere at a cabin or something like that with their boyfriends." His voice trailed off when Mr. Harrison shot him a withering glance.

"Thanks, but that's not much consolation."

Pugnaciously Barbara leaned over the desk. "Yeah. Just what are you insinuating, buster? Huh? Just what are you insinuating?"

Exasperated, he tried to control his temper. "Look, why don't you just go to the counter over there and help him fill out the form?"

"No! I want to know what you mean by that. Just what do you think we are? What kind of person do you take me for?" He just looked up at her from beneath his heavy eyelids and she backed off, turning to Phyl and saying, "Well, I think he should take it back! He's not talking to me like that."

"I wasn't talking to you, young lady. But if it will calm things down, or calm *you* down, I take it back. All right? I'm sure you girls aren't like that, aren't like the other girls on campus. Okay?"

"Yes, we are, as a matter of fact. Worse. But it's none of your goddamn business."

Phyllis took Barbara by the arm and tried to lead her away from the sergeant's desk. "Come on, Barb. You're not helping things here at all."

"I wish I had a drink!"

"Shh!"

Barbara pulled away from Phyl's restraining arm and stood by the counter, sulking. Phyllis shrugged, then went to the counter where Clare's father was filling out the form, leaning over quietly and asking him if there was anything she could do to help.

In the meantime the Sergeant was writing in a small book. He looked up from his desk and cleared his throat.

Stonily, Barbara ignored him until he repeated it, then she looked over at him coldly.

"Excuse me. Could you tell me the number of the sorority house, the telephone number? Please!"

Her attitude seemed to change at once. She smiled at him and said, "Yeah, sure. It's FEllatio 2-0880."

He started to write, then stopped and asked, "What?"

With an air of impatience she repeated the number, adding, "It's a new exchange. FEllatio. F . . . E . . ."

The sergeant shook his head. "Yeah, it's a new one to me. How do you spell it?"

Turning her back to him and carefully examining her fingernails in feigned boredom she said, “Capital F-E-small double ll-a-t-i-o.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

At the same time, not far from the station, in the hall where Jess had told him about the baby, Peter Smythe struck the first chord of the sonata he had chosen to play as his audition piece. Three elderly gentlemen sat in three stiff straight-backed chairs opposite the grand piano where Peter sat. The three older men in the room had expressionless faces while Peter’s reflected his passion, and his anxiety. He was playing beautifully, he knew that.

Feeling pleased with himself he was suddenly aware that he had struck a wrong note. Continuing to play he looked down at the keys, perplexed and uneasy. Continuing to play he glanced over at them hesitantly. They might as well have been statues.

Once more his hands stumbled, this time badly. Beads of sweat began to form on his forehead and he attempted to turn his concentration completely on the music, shutting out the profiles of the three old men, shutting out the conversation with Jess, hearing nothing but the music.

There, he thought, got it right. His eyes flashed up as his fingers flew correctly over the difficult passage. Unbelieving, he heard a false note, saw the eyes of one of the judges flicker and his head nod depreciatingly at the blunder.

Finally, eons later, the torment was over and the piece ended. Peter sat silently looking straight ahead as the three men rose and marched past him not unlike three toy soldiers marching stiffly across a parade ground. They stopped behind him for a moment and one of them, he couldn’t tell which for he didn’t bother to look up, said formally, “Thank you very much, Mr. Smythe.” Then, one by one, they walked away, through the door and down the hall.

Peter stared at the keyboard as their footsteps echoed and then faded away. He bit his lip until there was a single drop of blood which he absent-mindedly licked away with his tongue. Thoughtfully he poked a key on the piano and listened to the sound echo through the empty room. He started to play again but once more he made a mistake. He stopped, composed himself, took a deep breath and started again. He was playing the passage where he had failed in front of the three judges.

This time there was no mistake. Tears flowed down his cheeks as he finished it perfectly. Then he stopped and looked up but the men were far away. He laughed bitterly, looked disdainfully at the piano, got up slowly and walked toward the door. Passing a music stand in the

middle of the room he stopped, thought for a moment, then picked it up and walked back to the piano. He took the top off the heavy metal base, put it down and lifted the lid of the grand piano. Then he picked up the base of the music stand, held it aloft for ten seconds or longer and with a malicious look on his face which was still contorted from the tears, he slammed the base as hard as he could into the strings of the piano. Viciously and methodically he slammed it down again and again as the sound boomed through the room.

Strings were snapping, chips of wood flying and the sound overwhelming. All at once he stopped, set the base down and coolly examined his handiwork.

He turned coolly and walked across the room and walked out, carefully closing the door behind him.

Despite the chill in the hockey rink, all of the players were sweating profusely. The lights were bright and the young men were moving swiftly up and down the rink, passing the puck back and forth, crossing the blue line and firing shots at the goalie who was sweating most of all despite the fact that he had to move far less than the other skaters. The heavy padding weighed him down and the plastic mask made it almost impossible for air to reach any part of him. Besides, there was activity in goal-tending, a great deal of it as he dived and kicked and flashed out a hand or stick to deter the puck from its course toward the net behind him.

Jess came into the rink and looked down, saw the goalie and, although he was masked, was sure it was the man she was looking for. She moved through the empty seats and down behind the plastic that was behind the goal net. Twice she called out but there was too much noise and his concentration was too great for her to be able to attract his attention that way. Finally, uncharacteristically, she put two fingers to her lips and whistled shrilly. All at once all of the action stopped and the goalie turned to her.

"Can I see you a minute?" she called to Chris Hayden.

Through the mask he answered what she thought was the word, "sure," then he signalled to the bench and another player, dressed similarly, skated over to the net while Chris, still wearing his mask, came around behind it and pointed to a spot just beyond the plastic.

Jess walked over quickly, but he was on skates and made it much faster so that he was waiting, still masked, when she arrived.

Through a wire screen she asked, "Have you seen Clare today?"

"No. She went home."

"No, she didn't. No one knows where she is. How about last night?"

“No. Not after I brought her home.” He pushed the mask back. “What do you mean no one knows where she is?”

Shouting over the renewed sound of the practice she said, “I thought maybe she was with you, or at least you might have heard from her.”

“No. Like I said, not since last night. Early. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. I just was hoping—”

“Look, maybe it sounds a bit alarmist, but do you think we ought to go to the police, Jess?”

“Her father is already a bit alarmist. He went to them this afternoon. Unfortunately the local constabulary didn’t take it all too seriously.”

“They *what?* Why not?”

“I think they figured she was shacked up somewhere. It seems, according to the sergeant on duty which I got second hand from Phyl when she called, that that is where young maidens from the college usually are when they turn up missing. Off in the woods somewhere with a romantic hero. As you fit the bill, well, no doubt they’re wrong in this case.” She signed wearily. “Christ, I’m worried, Chris.”

“So am I. Oh, I doubt if anything has happened to her, but I suppose the fuzz said that to Clare’s father, about being shacked up?”

“More or less. It’s only hearsay evidence from Phyl, but she’s pretty reliable. Says that Barb gave the man in blue a tongue lashing which sounds pretty typical, and Clare’s father didn’t exactly like the implication.”

“No doubt. That’s what I’m worried about. I haven’t met him yet. After Christmas I was going to visit—”

“So that’s why she wouldn’t go skiing with Barb.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Doesn’t matter. Ancient history. What shall we do, Chris?”

I think . . . I think I’d better go see them. The police. And her father. Damn, damn, damn, damn!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the dim light of the dining room Mr. Harrison sat disconsolately at the table with Mrs. MacHenry and Phyl while off to one side Barbara was slouched in a heavy chair, a drink in her hand.

Mrs. Mac looked up from her plate where she had been gorging herself and said to him, “Mr. Harrison, really I do wish you’d eat something. Starving yourself isn’t going to help the situation at all. In fact, I always say that you can’t get anything done on an empty stomach. I tell the girls that, too, when they’re worried about,” she hesitated, “an exam or something.”

“Thank you very much, Mrs. MacHenry. But, no thank you. I just have no appetite. I feel like I should be doing something but frankly I don’t know what to do.”

“One thing you could do would be to eat to keep your strength up.” When she saw that remark had made no dent she went on, “Well, just stop worrying. The best thing you can do is wait here and I’m sure she’ll call or show up.”

Mrs. Mac heaved herself up from her chair and went out toward the kitchen as Mr. Harrison said to no one in particular, “I just wish I knew what to do.”

Phyl nodded sympathetically. She could understand how he felt. She didn’t want to eat, either, but she was forcing herself. Barbara had turned her nose up at the stew and proceeded to pour another drink.

There was a long silence punctuated by the sound of Mrs. MacHenry in the kitchen banging pots and closing cabinet doors. Both Barbara and Phyl knew that she was looking for her bottle of sherry but neither felt like snickering at the moment.

Finally Barbara said, “Did you know? And this is a little-known fact . . .” She stopped and took some of her drink while Mr. Harrison eyed her apprehensively and Phyl tried desperately to think of something to say.

At last Barb continued, “There are some species of turtles . . .” She stood for dramatic emphasis. “Some species of turtles, or is it tortoises? No, it’s turtles. There are some species of turtles that screw for three days without stopping.”

Mrs. MacHenry entered the room and stood there dumbfounded, trying not to look at Mr. Harrison who was aghast.

Barbara fell back into her chair and added, “Oh, yes. You may not

believe me, but I'm not making it up. They screw for three days. Whoopee!"

Mrs. Mac came further into the room as though to protect poor Mr. Harrison from Barbara. "Barb, dear . . ." she started to say but she was interrupted.

"You don't believe me, do you? Well, it's true. Three days without stopping! I'm lucky if I can get three minutes. Three days, honest Injun. I know, 'cause after they told us that in some dumb class or other. I went to the zoo to watch them. It's very boring. I didn't stay for the whole three days, actually. I took their word for it. So I went over—because I got bored watching the turtles do it—I went over to watch the zebras. They only take about thirty seconds. Reminds me of me. No, it reminds me of a joke about this pony who's a star and he wants to get fixed up so they send him a zebra up to his hotel room and the next day they ask him how he liked her and he said he didn't know 'cause he spent all night trying to get her pajamas off." She started to giggle insanely and then broke into paroxysms of drunken laughter.

The others stared at the wall, the ceiling, the floor, anywhere but at each other, embarrassed, unsure what to say or do.

All at once Barbara said, "You think it's my fault, don't you?"

Phyllis said, "Barbara, stop it."

"You do. Don't shit me. Why don't you just come out and say it? All of you. It's my fault. Go ahead, say it! You think I drove her off. If she's dead you're going to blame me!"

There was a long, stricken silence. Mr. Harrison's face turned white as the word he had not dared to think was spoken aloud for the first time. He sat back and closed his eyes as Phyl said, in a low voice, "Barb! For God's sake!"

Realizing what she had said but unable to go back, to retract or modify her words, Barbara answered, "That's what you're all thinking. Why don't you just say it?"

Then she started to sob and Mrs. MacHenry went to her, putting her arm around the girl and saying in a consoling voice, "Barb, you don't know what you're saying. I think you've had too much to drink, dear. Mr. Harrison is going to have a very poor impression of this house."

"I don't give a shit," Barbara answered, pulling from Mrs. Mac's grasp. "I'm sick of people insinuating things around here." She swayed and steadied herself on the edge of the table. "I'm sick of people never coming out and saying what they really mean."

Phyl moved to her and said quietly, "Barb, why don't you go up and lie down for a while? We're all upset and no one—"

“Oh, shut up!” Then she turned to Mrs. Mac and added, “And leave me alone, goddamn it! I know you think it’s my fault. You’ve been implying it all the goddamned afternoon!”

“Barb,” Phyl said, looking across to Mrs. Mac, “you’re drunk. Now go to bed!”

Barbara was about to answer but she felt herself grow dizzy. With an effort of will she drew herself up, pushed off from the table and stormed from the dining room, slamming the door behind her. Mr. Harrison, his eyes closed, sat still, except for the slow negative motion of his head as he shook it back and forth in fear and disbelief.

The lights were burning bright in the police station as Lieutenant Ken Fuller sympathetically watched and listened to a thirty-five-year-old woman wearing rollers in her hair who was trying to keep her voice from quavering as she sat in his office and told him a story. Fighting back the tears, she said, “She’s out of school for the Christmas holidays but you see there was band practice today, over at the high school. Janice plays the clarinet and even though school is out they have practice because they’re going to give a band concert.”

About the same age as the woman, Fuller could only think that he might be the father of a daughter such as the one she was talking about. That he might have a Janice who played the clarinet. He tried to erase such an image and to concentrate as dispassionately as possible on her words.

“Go on, Mrs. Quaife.”

“When she didn’t come home, I called Melody Greene’s place. That’s her best friend. But they hadn’t seen her all day. I talked to Melody and to Mrs. Greene. She’s only thirteen, Lieutenant, my Janice and she’s never been late like this. My husband, he’s a trucker and he’s on the road this week, half way across the country. I don’t know how to get in touch with him. Anyway, I was so worried, so I came over here.”

Her last words were almost apologetic as though had her husband been home he might have prevented her from doing anything so foolish as going to the police.

To make her feel more easy, Fuller said, “You did the right thing, Mrs. Quaife. That’s what we’re here for. Now . . . how long since you—or anyone—actually saw her? Saw Janice?”

“Well, not since band practice this morning. She was there. I checked and she was at practice, then she left and that’s the last . . .” She was about to break down again when her attention was turned to the noise outside as a young man and woman came in the front door

of the station house.

The young man was visibly angry but Sergeant Nash on the front desk nearby did not notice it as he extended a warm greeting.

“Here’s our star goalie! How’s the boy, Chris?”

“Listen, Nash, you may be a cop but in my opinion you’re a stupid, s.o.b. with a big effing mouth.”

Dumbfounded Nash replied, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Hearing the noise, Lieutenant Fuller came out of his office and was surprised to see Chris Hayden standing there confronting Sergeant Nash.

“Hi, Chris. How’s your brother? I haven’t seen—”

Hayden interrupted him. “I’ve got to talk to you, Ken.” He walked past Nash and into the area behind the front desk where Fuller was standing. Jess followed him tentatively.

“So talk. What is it?”

Chris looked back at Nash as he said, “I want to know why nothing’s been done about Clare Harrison being missing? And how does this schmuck get away with saying the kind of things he does, especially to the girl’s father?”

Trying to calm Chris down, Fuller said, “Why? Do you know her?”

“Yes I know her. I’ve been taking her out. Oh, this is Jess, Jessica Bradford. She lives at the same sorority house as Clare. Jess, this is Ken Fuller.”

“How do you do,” Ken said.

“To tell you the truth,” Jess replied, “not very well. We’re really worried, and it doesn’t seem to be worrying anyone else.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. Come on into my ofiice.” As they moved past him he called over to Sergeant Nash, “Sergeant, get me the file on the Harrison girl.”

Woefully Nash, who looked as though he had been caught in a buzzsaw, dug through the papers on his desk.

Inside Fuller’s office, after the introductions were performed Ken asked Chris what had happened.

“Well, I don’t really know. That’s why I brought Jess along. She knows more than I do.”

Ken turned to Jess and asked, “Okay, why don’t you tell me what you know and we’ll see if we can piece this thing together?”

“All right. I’ll try. Last night we all celebrated a little at the house. Then Clare went up to her room to pack. That’s the last anyone saw her. Most of the girls have left for the holidays. The few of us that are left were to go over to one of the fraternity houses for a small party

for underprivileged kids. Clare didn't show up at breakfast, but then most of us eat at different times. Mrs. Mac, she's the house mother, Mrs. MacHenry, went out. So she didn't see her. Then Clare didn't show up at the party. In the meantime her father came and was supposed to meet her at one o'clock outside the 'frat' house. He showed up but she didn't. He went to our house and found her bag packed but no Clare. He came here with another of the girls and they reported it. So far she hasn't returned to the house and no one has seen her. That's it, I guess."

Lieutenant Fuller had followed her story carefully, making notes as she talked. Once or twice he looked over at Mrs. Quaife who was sitting silently listening to Jessica Bradford's story.

When Jess was finished he thought for a few minutes before he spoke. "Well, it may be nothing, probably *is* nothing, but I think that we had better do a search just to be on the safe side. There's a park between the high school and Mrs. Quaife's house, and it seems sensible to start there." He looked over at Chris and added, "Now here's what I want you to do."

CHAPTER EIGHT

There they are again. And that man is there, too. The older one. What's he doing here? I saw him inside with the old lady. They were on the floor together. Picking something up. Why doesn't he go away? She doesn't want to have anything to do with him. She's mine now. Nasty Billy. He would spank you if he knew. Why doesn't he go? Why don't they all go away? Then maybe I'd be free. I feel sick again. I'm going to call. Why doesn't someone stop me, why?

Inside the house, oblivious of the stranger who prowled just outside and watched through the living room window Phyl was performing the introductions. Once Jess and Chris had met Mr. Harrison Chris told him what the police were planning to do. They all left the room together, Jess, Phyl, Chris and Mr. Harrison followed by Mrs. Mac who helped them into their coats in the hallway.

"Girls, it's terribly cold out!"

"We won't be very long, Mrs. Mac," Jess said, adjusting her long scarf.

As they went out the door Phyl called back to Mrs. MacHenry, "Have a look in on Barb, would you Mrs. Mac? She's probably asleep but just see that she's all right. Her asthma—"

"Yes, dear. Now, for heaven's sake, stay bundled up! No sense in coming down with pneumonia. And be careful. Stay together, all of you."

The door closed in front of her and she stood in the hall for a moment before she turned the lock and went back to the stairs that led to the second floor. Slowly she climbed them, telling herself that there seemed to be more steps every day. At the top she hesitated, then went directly to Barbara's room.

Inside she switched on the bedside lamp and looked down at the motionless girl. There was a bottle beside the lamp on the table and she poured a drink from it before setting about the task of undressing Barbara.

As she removed the girl's shoes she muttered, "God! You don't know how well off you are." Tossing the shoes on the floor she picked up the glass and took a quick swig and then turned her attention to Barbara's clothes.

The skirt was easy but she had to struggle to get the blouse off after unbuttoning it. "I'm telling you," she said to no one in particular.

"Hardly in the line of duty, undressing drunken broads. I must be the best goddamn house mother on campus. Come on, you little bitch, roll over. I'll bet you aren't this much trouble to those boys who . . . Come on."

Finally the blouse came off and she stopped for a moment, breathless, before rolling Barbara on her back. "If they were to give out the award for the best house mother, I'll bet I'd get it, hands down. In a walk. No competition. Where's that glass?"

She finished what she had poured and looked back at Barbara, then lifted her up and slipped her arm underneath the girl's shoulder. "What a slob! Twelve years I've been looking after girls like you and what has it gotten me? Tired feet and a tired back. And no gratitude at all!"

She unfastened the bra from behind and let it slip awkwardly down Barbara's shoulders, then one at a time she lifted the girl's arms and took the straps over them so that all Barbara had on was her stockings and panties. She let the girl slip back down onto the bed, half crumpled into the fetal position. "Shit! What a dead weight. You'd think I'd at least get 'house mother of the year' or some-such. All right, Barb, if you insist I'll have another."

She reached over and took the top from the bottle, brought it directly to her mouth, foregoing the glass. "Here's to you, you drunken slob!"

Sitting heavily on the bed she glanced around the room, the bottle still in her hand. "God, how can she drink that stuff! Give me sherry any day."

She sat for a while lost in a kind of reverie while Barbara snored beside her. At last she said, "Keep snoring, honey. It's such a lovely sound. That's the girl. It'll really turn those boys on. Between your snoring and your dirty mouth you'll be the most popular lay on campus. Boy, I should have been smart like my sister. She snored. But she married a man with money. Smart girl. Didn't let him find that out, that she snored, until after she hooked him. Let's have another drink."

The bottle was still in her hand but for some reason she reached and got the glass, poured some of the whiskey into it and held it aloft.

"Happy days! Up the rebels, with a rope. Boy what a life I'd have. Florida every winter." Leaning back she rested the glass on the area between Barbara's shoulder and the small of her back. "Marry a man with money, and don't let him know you snore, honey. Hey, that's a rhyme!"

Barbara stirred and tried to swat the chilly glass from her back. The motion awakened Mrs. Mac who quickly moved the glass away,

finished its contents and replaced it on the table saying, “Sorry, honey. I know you need your beauty rest.”

She rubbed the spot where the glass had been sitting and added, “It’s okay, honey. Mrs. Mac is here. She’ll take care of you. It’s okay. Hey, let’s have another drink.”

The voice echoed through the woods from the bullhorn which Lieutenant Ken Fuller was holding in his hand. He was standing at the base of a statue and there were about fifty people crowded about him, plus two teams of hunting dogs and off to one side sat several snowmobiles.

The voice sounded hollow and some of the words were lost as it died on the wind but the purpose and most of the words were clear: “Mrs. Quaife and Mr. Harrison have asked me to express their thanks to you for coming out on such a cold night to help.” Fuller paused to get his breath and looked around. Mr. Harrison, erect, his face a mask, stood nearby while Mrs. Quaife sat some yards away in a squad car, looking straight ahead fearfully, fighting back her emotions.

Fuller continued through the bullhorn. “Now, Mrs. Quaife has told us that Janice would very likely have come through this park on her way home from school this afternoon, so the first thing we’re going to do is comb this park. We’ve got plenty of people, we’ve got dogs and we’ve got light.”

He looked out over the crowd to make sure that his words were being understood and then he went on, “I’d like everyone to spread out evenly across the south edge here of the park, stay close to one another but far enough apart so that we don’t miss any place, and we’ll walk through slowly. Check every clump, ever tree and bush, every pile of snow. Don’t hurry, keep up a steady pace but don’t get ahead or behind the people on either side of you. Is that clear?”

When there was a murmur of assent he added, “Don’t bunch up! The two dog teams will lead the way. Spread out behind them. Don’t get ahead or you’ll confuse them. Matt!” When an elderly policeman ambled forward Fuller said to him, “You and Carly and George go out on the flanks. Otherwise the fumes’ll mess up the dogs. Besides the snowmobiles will act as a boundary for us. Don’t go more than ten miles an hour or you won’t be any use.”

Chris stood beside Jess rubbing her back and shoulders to help warm her up. She was, she knew, shivering as much from fear as from the cold, but his hands would give her a feeling of security as well as warmth that she needed at the moment very much.

Jess smiled at him wanly and said, “I like your friend, Chris. He’s

efficient but he's decent, too."

"Ken? Yeah, he's very special. Ought to be something other than a cop. No, maybe we should have more cops like him, and fewer guys like Nash. Don't worry, Jess."

"Thanks. But I'm the one who should be telling that to you. How's Mr. Harrison taking it?"

"He's like a brick over there. But he's pretty shook, you can tell."

They were interrupted by Fuller's voice once more. "Once we get to the other side, we'll start working our way over to the college. Now, if anyone finds anything, send someone out right away to tell the others. Call out as loud as you can and get word back to me. All right? Let's go."

The snowmobiles fanned out as the dogs, let off their leashes, leaped off and the whole search party, reluctantly at first, then swiftly, surged forward with much shouting from the searchers and continual yelping from the dogs. The snow had stopped and the moon once more made its appearance.

On the other side of the park, on the college campus, the same moon silently silhouetted the sorority house on the hill. Finally the silence was broken by the crunch of footsteps in the new snow and a figure moved out of the shadows and squatted down against a tree, watching the house for a few seconds. He sighed, looked at his watch, rubbed his forehead thoughtfully and then Peter Smythe stood up, stared at the dark house for a few more minutes before he started to walk, the sound of his footsteps receding in the crisp snow.

Upstairs in the attic, Claude wandered through an array of trunks and boxes, occasionally looking up at the window through which the moonlight poured. Sitting in the rocking chair was a human form and Claude leaped onto its lap. The chair moved but the form didn't, even when Claude purred and rubbed against Clare Harrison's body lovingly. Her face stared out blankly through the piece of plastic as her body continued to rock.

Downstairs, unaware of Claude's whereabouts, Mrs. MacHenry, dressed in a wool suit and matching hat, obviously ready for traveling, sat at a small desk in the living room sipping on a drink as she penned a note to the few girls who had not yet left the house for the Christmas vacation.

When she had finished she signed it with a flourish and then began to reread it to herself in a low mumbling monotone, standing and pacing the room and hall as she read.

"Dear girls. (Should have dotted that 'i', they'll think I'm illiterate)

Mrs. Mac is deeply sorry (Where's that drink? Ah, there you are.) but she has to go away tonight. I know I am obligated to stay until all of you girls have left the house for the holidays, but (Christ, I've got lousy penmanship) I'm sure you will understand that this is the only time I could get a ticket to go for Christmas at my sister's.

"I'm sure that Clare will show up. (Like hell I am.) Please say goodbye to Mr. Harrison for me. Merry Christmas to all of you.

"Love, Mrs. Mac.

"There, that ought to hold the little . . . Uh-oh."

She went back to the desk and picked up the pen, adding a line which she read aloud as she wrote. "P.S. I still cannot find Claude. Could you keep an eye out for him? Mr. Reynolds said that he would feed him over the holidays."

She waved the letter in the air a few times to dry the ink then took a piece of Scotch tape from a roll on the desk, folded the note and taped it to the front of the Christmas tree. Glancing at her watch she saw that it was late so she hurried out into the hall and rapidly climbed the stairs to her room on the second floor.

Above her, in the attic, a rasping voice prayed aloud with only the indifferent Claude and the no longer breathing Clare Harrison as audience.

"Oh, God! No! Please! Please, stop me! Please! I don't want to do it. Won't you stop me, please? I can't help myself."

There was an ominous silence and then the sound of a cat meowing. The person who had just spoken looked around but Claude was nowhere in sight and the hideously contorted face of the girl in the plastic bag watched mutely as his body heaved from its crouching position beside the bed.

CHAPTER NINE

The cab would be there any minute, she told herself as she bustled about the small bedroom adding last minute items to the second of two bags, the first of which was already closed and standing ready by the door. Scurrying from place to place she threw things helter-skelter into the bag while she kept one ear cocked for the sound of the doorbell which would mean that the taxi driver was waiting outside in the cold, no doubt impatiently stamping his foot.

Although he had not arrived she already anticipated his annoyance and said aloud, “Let him wait.”

Next to the open suitcase was the box that contained the nightgown the girls had given her as a Christmas present. She opened it and took out the negligee, holding it up in front of her. Then beginning to hum she waltzed to the mirror, spun around and bowed to her image in imitation of her once upon a time vaudeville act.

Remembering the hour she stopped as quickly as she started, tossed the negligee into the suitcase and hurriedly closed it. Just as she finished locking the snaps she heard the honking of a car horn from in front of the house.

She ran to the window, looked out and saw the taxi waiting there with no driver in sight. There was another call from the horn before she released the curtain.

“All right,” she said, “goddamn it, I hear you. Can’t even come to the front door? I’m supposed to carry these damn bags myself. What’s the world coming to. Jesus. Lazy bum, afraid of a little cold air?”

She picked up the bag from the bed, crossed the room, turned off the light, reached down and gathered up the other suitcase and went into the hall still muttering to herself about the poor quality of service as compared to when she was a young lady.

She was about to go down the stairs when she was stopped by a sound much softer and far closer than that of the taxi horn. Turning around she called out, “Claude!”

Then she put the two bags down, listened again before she yelled, “Where are you? Now you stop hiding like this!” Heading back down the hall away from the stairs to the main floor she felt herself getting angry for, no doubt, the driver had the meter already running.

“Goddamn it, Claude, you’re going to make me late and cost me a fortune!” She listened at Clare’s room, then Barbara’s, but there was

no sound. “Come and say goodbye to Mamma, Claude. You little—!”

At the end of the hall were the stairs leading to the attic trapdoor and she stopped there, listening as the cat meowed from above.

“How the hell did you get up there?” she called.

Climbing the steps she pushed the trapdoor with her hand as the taxi driver started to honk his horn impatiently. Stopping she turned and yelled to the area below her, “Oh, shut up! You can wait.” Turning back she pushed harder saying softly, “Here, Claude.”

The door creaked eerily as she pushed it all the way open and climbed a few more steps so that her head was above the attic floor. Suddenly she shrieked and leaned down to look at where she had torn a stocking on a nail.

“Damn it, Claude, look what you’ve made me do!” Looking back up she called, “Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!”

The attic was dark except for the moonlight and she, because she was hardly above ground level and because it was not likely for Claude to be above her, did not look up or she might have seen in the half-light something swaying just above her head.

Squinting as she tried to adjust her eyes to the darkness she muttered, “I’ve got to clean this mess up one of these days. Come on, Claude. I can’t see a damned thing up here. Here, kitty.”

Outside the horn honked again making her jump. “Dammit! Here, Claude. Here, kitty! Goddamn it, Claude, I’m gonna have you fixed.”

She looked up and stopped speaking, a puzzled look coming over her face as she saw what was sitting in the rocker just beyond the trap door. Her expression changed to one of horror as she realized that it was Clare Harrison and then as she stumbled back in shock she heard a loud crash and she turned her head up just in time to see the noose of the rope that had dangled above her tumbling down toward her.

Terrified and helpless she couldn’t move, couldn’t open her mouth to scream as the rope pulled taut and her struggling body was jerked upward toward the rafters.

The taxi driver had finally come to the front door and he was standing there ringing the doorbell insistently as she was slowly strangled to death.

Several times he called out, “Hey! Is anybody there?” But there was only an answering silence and finally he shrugged and walked back to his cab as the trapdoor was creakily lowered on its rusty hinges.

Had the cab driver looked to the attic he might have seen silhouetted in the window a form watching him as he got back into his taxi after curiously looking at the lower part of the big, silent house. Once in the cab he turned on the ignition and the lights, backed up

and after looking back once more, pulled away.

The figure in the window was breathing heavily, a sound that was almost deafening. The breathing was interspersed with shrieks of rage as though the person to whom the voice belonged was going to attack and destroy the entire attic.

Mrs. Mac's body hung lifelessly until it was suddenly smashed aside, arcing broadly across the room.

It was as though there were a ferocious, trapped animal in the cage of the attic, clawing and screaming to get out.

The animal slammed up against a wall and, careening through the cramped attic space with an agonized wail, knocked over a chair and broke the rocking horse with almost super-human strength. It crashed viciously into a corner and there was the sound of breaking glass followed by gagging, retching, hissing and then growls. Its body shook on the floor and the growls turned to whimpers and finally to the simple sound of a man crying.

The beams of the powerful snowmobile headlights flared off of the crisp, white snow. Between them, a long line of people trudged wearily forward across the park. The air was bitter and many of the people looked up from time to time, envious of the warmth and comfort seemingly offered from the lights of the houses that dotted the periphery of the search area.

Jess crossed past several of the searchers and found Chris Hayden. She said to him, "Hey, I'm going to have to split." Phyl, who was on the far side of Chris, asked her why and she answered, "Peter's coming over to the house and I can't miss him. I'm late already. Besides, there's more people here than are needed. We were tripping over each other over in my section."

Mr. Harrison saw the three young people whom he knew and joined them. "My God," he said, "it's cold."

"Yeah, I'll be going home very soon, too. Jess was just saying she had an appointment, Mr. Harrison."

"I'm sorry," Jess said to him but he held up his hand.

"No need to apologize. I appreciate your concern."

"I'm freezing," Phyllis said. "But I'll stay with Chris and Mr. Harrison."

"We'll let you know if anything happens," Chris said to Jess.

She said goodbye to all of them and then broke away from the group and ran off toward the snowmobile and the street nearby, her ears echoing to the sound of unknown voices calling out "Janice! Clare."

Not long after Jess had left, a jarring scream pierced the frosty air of the park. As two boys ran up a horrified girl stood staring at the ground. One of the boys started running hysterically through the woods calling for Lieutenant Fuller while the other, more collected, stayed beside the trembling girl and called out, “Hey! Get someone over here!”

He looked down again and that was his undoing. Quickly he turned away from the girl and retched behind a tree as others began to arrive. One by one they looked down and then in sickening disgust looked away.

Standing in front of his car drinking coffee, Mr. Harrison heard the boy’s voice and the excited responses from the crowd. He gave those near him a hopeful look and ran off into the park following the clamor.

Phyl and Chris were not too far from the noise so that they arrived at the scene among the first. “Don’t look, Phyl,” Chris said to her but it was too late.

Still sitting in the back seat of the squad car, Mrs. Quaife saw people running past toward the park area. Hearing the shouting she looked around in alarm and then hastily climbed out of the car. Outside, one of the policemen took her by the arm and tried to get her to go back into the car.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Quaife. Why don’t you just wait here? We’ll let you know if there’s something—”

Hysterically she pulled away from him. “No! Let me alone. Don’t try to stop me!” Free of him she started to move in the direction of the crowd calling out, “They found Janice! Didn’t they? They found my baby! I know it!”

He got hold of her arm again but her strength was too much for him.

“Let me go, do you hear! Where is she?”

Reaching out she grabbed a man who was rushing past her. “Where is she? Tell me!” When he didn’t answer she let him go and ran off into the park, screaming, “Tell me where she is!”

She almost collided with Mr. Harrison who, too, was running in the direction of all the noise and light calling out, “Where are you?”

Several voices at once spoke to him and he made the right turn so that he came up just behind Chris, looking ill, and Phyl with her head averted, both of their faces registering shock and revulsion.

Mrs. Quaife pushed through them and into the center of the group, still calling out her daughter’s name. When she reached the spot she stopped and looked down, the sound dying on her lips as the full

impact of what lay on the ground hit her. Her face contorted in agony and she screamed once before she fainted.

Back at the house Clare Harrison's body sat still in the rocker only a few feet from where that of Mrs. MacHenry hung tautly from the rope tied to the rafters. Claude was not about and there was no sound in the attic.

Finally, from below, cutting harshly into the silence, could be heard the jangling of the telephone.

CHAPTER TEN

The phone rang over and over again in the empty house. Then it stopped and the hall was quiet. Seconds later it began to ring again and there was the noise of a key being turned in a lock, the loud slam of a door being shut and a mittened hand reached out and picked up the receiver.

Her cheeks red and her breathing labored from the cold, Jess put the receiver to her mouth and ear.

"Hello."

Struggling with her coat, trying to get it off, she at once realized who it was on the other end of the line.

This time the caller's voice was loud in contrast to the obscene whisper of the previous messages. Some of the sounds she recognized as almost human but most of them were growls and wheezes that could only have come from some wounded animal. The caller's psychotic state was such, she realized, that he was in the throes of a horrible schizophrenia which he could not help, and for a brief moment she almost pitied him as he spoke alternately to her and played out several roles with himself from the traumatic past of his life.

"Hello," she said again, trying to control her anger and fear. "Look, who is this?"

Her question was answered by moaning which switched abruptly to a little girl crying and building quickly to a scream of agony, a gasping for breath and then once more the man's voice, soft this time, pleading.

"Help me! Stop me! Please! Oh, God, please! Please stop me. I don't know what I'm doing. I can't stop."

"Stop what? What are you doing?" Maybe, she told herself, I can help him. Talk to him, try to get him to go to the hospital.

When he didn't answer her question but began to sob she said as gently as possible, trying to keep the note of fear from her own voice, "What do you want? Why are you doing this?"

For an answer there was a choking, rasping sound, then a woman's voice, high-pitched, nearly hysterical with crying said, "Now, look here! I know he just isn't capable of such a thing. It must have been, maybe she's lying. He wouldn't do that. Why he doesn't even know the difference."

Trying to break through, Jess asked, “Who are you? For God’s sake, what are you doing?”

The woman’s voice began to cry afresh, sobbing an incoherent answer and then it was replaced by a man, a harsh, ugly, strong voice which said, “You bitch! I’ll fix you!”

Frightened, for she was not sure to whom he spoke, Jess said, “Stop it! Please stop it! Please stop calling here.”

Gasping, wheezing, the little girl crying, all of the sounds mixed disgustingly together almost nauseated her. Finally confused, angry and fearful, she hung up the telephone, shaking her head, “Jesus Christ!”

She hurried down the hall to the bottom of the stairs and shouted up, “Mrs. Mac? Hey, Mrs. Mac! Are you home? We got another one of those calls. Hello, up there? Are you home?”

In the attic on the third floor, Mrs. Mac did not hear her so only empty silence greeted Jess’s call.

When she got no response from above, Jess finished taking off her coat while she walked back through the kitchen. She hung it up in the dark hall and looked at the telephone, half expecting it to ring again. Very agitated, she went to it and quickly picked it up, dialed a number. Her back was to the stairway as she dialed or she might have fled from the house in terror for a dark form was moving slowly down the stairs in her direction. She finished fingering the number and heard it ringing on the other end. A voice answered and she said in a quavering voice, “Hello? Yes, I’d like to report that I’ve been getting obscene phone calls and I want to know what can be done about it? Yes, all right I’ll hold. I’m sure you’re busy but this is important. Yes, I’ll hold, but only for a minute.”

Tapping her foot impatiently she looked about the hall, finally turned just as the form reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped into the half-light.

Reacting she leaped back and then took a deep breath and relaxed.

“Peter! My God! You nearly scared the life out of me! Why didn’t you say something? I thought Barbara was the only one in the house.”

Tossing his coat casually over an idle chair in the hallway, Peter walked into the living room, saying, “Yeah, well you scared the hell out of me, too. What was all the yelling about?” He picked up a nutcracker and a few pecans from a bowl and began to shell them as he talked. “I was taking a nap. I hope you don’t mind but it was cold outside waiting for you. I came in through the kitchen. The front door was locked. I was going to sit here under the tree like a present but it was uncomfortable as hell. Finally I got sleepy so I went up to your room and flaked out on the bed.”

“I’m sorry I was late, but—”

“Yeah.”

He cracked another nut in studied indifference. Firmly she said, “Clare is missing. She hasn’t been seen since last night. There was a search party. I was with them, out looking for her.”

She had to call from the hall as he had disappeared in the living room. He came back just as a voice on the telephone spoke to her. “Yes,” she said into the receiver. “Hello?”

“How noble,” Peter said smugly, from the doorway.

Ignoring his caustic behavior she said into the phone, “Hello? What’s going on down there? I want to report something! No, I don’t want to hold! I’ve been holding.” She shook her head in exasperation and seeing Peter standing there she said, “How did the recital go?”

“How do you think it went!” he snapped.

Once more he disappeared into the living room and she could hear the cracking of another nut.

“What kind of a game are you playing?” she called out. “I thought you wanted to talk? So why don’t you sit down and quit attacking me and we’ll try to have a rational conversation—as soon as I can get these idiots at the police station to take my complaint. Yes? Hello. Stay on the line, goddamn it!”

The man at whom Jess was yelling had a throng of people milling about his desk as he spoke to her. Sergeant Nash was trying as best he could to cope with an extremely unfamiliar situation and to handle all of the phone calls that were pouring in since news of the discovery of Janice Quaife’s body had leaked out.

“Okay, lady,” he shouted, anything but calm himself, “calm down now. Let’s have the story. Oh, yes? All right. What’s the address? One-o-six Belmont Street. Uh-huh. How many calls?”

Across the room from him, Chris, Phyl and Mr. Harrison, bunched together, heard the sergeant mention the familiar address and they moved as a group closer to his desk as he continued to talk to Jess.

“Yes? How many calls did you say? Well, did you call the phone company? Oh, yeah? Well, miss, we’re very busy here. There’s been a child murdered in the park. Yes. yes, we found . . . Anyway, you should notify the phone company. We can’t . . . Look, lady, I don’t know when we can get a man on it. Were the calls threatening? Oh, yes? Well, I see. Maybe it’s not so serious. Maybe it’s one of your boyfriends playing a little joke. Yeah, well, I’ll report it and we’ll get a man on it as soon as possible. I’m sorry, miss, but that’s the best that we can do at the moment. We’re swamped down here.” He looked up at the crowd of people as he listened to Jess continue to express her

concern. Finally, when she stopped, he said again, “We’ll do the best we can okay. Goodbye.”

Hanging up, he wrote a few words on a form, took another piece of paper from his desk and stapled the two papers together, tossing them into a wire basket beside his desk.

Back at the house Jess put the receiver back in its cradle and covered her face in exhaustion and frustration. When she looked up Peter was standing there waiting. She walked toward him and together they went into the living room. As they walked he spoke.

“Look, Jess, I’ve done a lot of thinking and I’ve come to some conclusions.”

“Hmmm! I’ve been thinking, too.”

“Wait. Hear me out. I’ve decided I’m leaving the conservatory.”

Stunned, she said nothing and then, after a long pause, “Peter! What about your music? Your future, everything you’ve—”

“Look, just hear me out, will you?” When she stopped, he added gently, “Okay?”

She nodded and he sat down beside her, speaking in a low voice.

“Jess, I’ve lived in one room for eight years. I’m tired of sharing the ‘john’ with six other people. I really have had it with the artist starving in the garret routine. I’m quitting the conservatory, and we’re getting married.”

Still in a state of shock she could only look perplexed as she stared at him and then away when his eyes met hers.

“Well?” he asked. “What do you say? That’s a proposal of marriage, you know? Not the most poetic one ever devised, I know. Maybe I should be on bended knee. But it’s a genuine proposal, from the heart.”

“I know, Peter. I know it is. Now, will you just listen to me calmly ’cause I have something to say, too. Remember last year, when we met? You told me about wanting to be a concert pianist, how it was your greatest dream. And I believed in your dream, I wanted you to have it. At the same time I told you some of the things I wanted to do? Do you remember?”

When he nodded she continued, “Well, I still want to do those things. I don’t know why your dream has gone sour, if it has. Maybe it’s just the idea of being a father has made you jump to some sort of a conclusion. But whatever, I respected your dream and I thought you respected mine. Anyway, mine hasn’t gone sour. You can’t ask me to drop everything I’ve been working for and give up all my ambitions just because your plans have changed. It isn’t fair, and it makes my dreams, well, insignificant to you. And it shouldn’t be. It should not

have been. Be realistic, Peter. I can't marry you."

"Sure you could. What would it change? Because I've decided to leave the conservatory doesn't mean that *you* have to drop out. We could be married and you could do anything you want."

"With a baby? It just wouldn't work. I know it. Oh, I know. You'll say you can do both but I know how much time and trouble a baby is. I know that sooner or later I'd compromise. I'd stop my work and become a full time mother and housewife, and I'm not ready to do that yet."

He stood up and began to pace the room. Finally he turned to her and asked, "Well, what are you going to do about the baby?"

"I'm going . . ." She waited until he stopped pacing and was facing her. "I'm going to have the pregnancy terminated as soon as possible."

"Merry Christmas," he said bitterly and resumed his pacing. "How do your like your present? A dead fetus."

"Oh, Peter, for God's sake!"

Interrupting her, he said, "That certainly makes it all sound very tidy. But what I want to know is how you can justify getting your degree and working in the ghetto and all those marvelous liberal, altruistic things you talked about, at the expense of a human life? At the expense of killing, of killing my baby!"

She stood up and crossed the room. "Peter, don't be dramatic. I've never heard you speak out against abortion before, when it was something *you* wanted. Well, never mind. I told you this afternoon that I really didn't want to discuss it. I listened to you and heard what you had to say, and I've told you my decision. Because the decision *is* mine, Peter. It's my body and my future. I'll do what I want with both of them. Oh, Christ, I knew I should never have told you about it."

Before she got to the doorway he grabbed her and spun her around. "I'm not going to let you do this, Jess! Do you hear me? I'm not going to let you do this!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Chris was finally able to get through to Lieutenant Ken Fuller and the four of them, Fuller, Chris, Phyl and Mr. Harrison were in the lieutenant's office. Sergeant Nash stood diffidently in the doorway, half in, half out, as Fuller held up the two papers that Nash had thrown into his complaint basket.

For a while no one spoke until Nash finally said in a defeated voice, "I didn't want to bother you with it."

Sarcastically Ken Fuller said, "Oh, you didn't? Didn't want to bother me." He turned abruptly to Mr. Harrison. "Is this where your daughter lives, Mr. Harrison. Tell the nice sergeant."

"Yes, it is." Mr. Harrison was angry but he also felt something akin to pity for the hapless man standing first on one foot and then the other as he was being chewed out by his superior in front of all of them.

"Sergeant, a high school girl has been murdered in the park. Mr. Harrison's daughter is missing and now the house where she lives with a dozen other girls is getting obscene phone calls. In fact, *has* been getting obscene phone calls for some time according to this rather incomplete report you filled out. It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to tie these things together. Now, don't you think we'd better check it out, Sergeant?"

"Well, uh, Lieutenant, yeah, sure. I guess so. I mean, sure we should."

"Good."

Mr. Harrison said to Ken, "Thank you, Lieutenant. I know you're busy so we'll get out of here."

"Yeah, thanks, Ken," Chris said as he led Phyl from the room followed by Mr. Harrison.

As Sergeant Nash turned to go, Fuller called to him. "Oh, Sergeant, could I see you for minute? Come here, please."

"Yeah, sure, Lieutenant, what can I do?"

Holding up a slip of paper, waving it at Nash, Fuller asked, "Sergeant, what is this?"

"Uh, that's the number of the sorority house."

"The number?"

"The telephone number, Lieutenant."

"Fellatio?"

"Yeah, it's a new exchange. F—E—."

"New exchange, huh?"

"Yeah, right."

"How did you happen across this piece of information?"

"Uh, one of the girls, this afternoon, when they came to report that missing girl. I asked for the number, the telephone number of the sorority house and one of the girls, the other one, she gave it to me."

"She gave it to you, did she?"

"Yes, sir."

Fuller carefully ripped the paper into a number of pieces and let them float slowly to the floor of his office.

"Nash, I'm going to have you put in a home."

Peter Smythe's fist slammed into one of the ornaments on the Christmas tree, making it fall to the floor where it broke while the whole tree shook on its base. Jess watched his tantrum in wonder.

"You're a selfish bitch," he said. "You're talking about killing my baby like, like you were having a wart removed!"

"Now can you see why I didn't want to tell you in the first place? I knew you'd react, but I didn't think—"

"What the hell are you trying to do to me?"

"What are you trying to do to yourself?"

Wheeling on her furiously, Peter exclaimed, "Let's get one thing straight! You are not going to abort that baby. Do you hear me?"

"I could hardly not hear you, Peter. Probably most of the campus can hear you. But no matter how loud you yell it won't change my mind. You are not going to tell me what I can and cannot do."

"Jess, if you try to get an abortion—"

"Peter, let's just drop the whole thing, huh? It's late. I'm tired, you're tired. I think you'd better go."

They heard noises at the front door and Peter lowered his voice.

"Jess, if you do this, you'll be sorry."

"I said I think you'd better go!" Weary and distraught she let her anger rise to the surface as she added, "Get out!"

Raging, Peter rushed past her into the hallway where he almost collided with Ken Fuller. He didn't even acknowledge Phyl, who was standing between the lieutenant and another man, but pulled open the front door and angrily slammed it shut behind him. Ken Fuller watched him curiously as Phyl hurried into the living room calling

out, “Jess?” Jess was standing by the tree, staring into space when Phyl came into the room.

“Hi,” she said.

“Are you okay? Peter seemed . . .”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Any more news?”

“You heard about the high school girl?” When Jess nodded, Phyl said, “There are some people here to see about the phone calls. Out in the hall.”

She led Jess back into the hallway where Fuller and the other man were looking at the phone and the wire that led from it and was stapled to the wall. They looked up when the girls came into the room.

“Jess, this is Lieutenant Fuller. Jess is the one who called the station, Lieutenant. And this is, I’m sorry—”

“Graham,” the other man said, “Bill Graham.”

“Hi.”

“You’re the one who called the station?” Fuller asked. “Miss—”

“Jessica Bradley. Yes, I’m the one. I guess I’ve gotten more of the calls.”

“Just a second,” Fuller said. “Graham, why don’t you get started down here.” He turned to Jess and Phyl. “We’re going to put a tap on your phone. And, if you don’t mind, I’d like to take a look at Clare Harrison’s room.”

“Sure,” Phyl said as the two men took off their coats.

“This the only extension?” Graham asked.

“Yes. It has a long cord. Normally,” Jessica answered, “it’s in the living room but if you want privacy you bring it out here. Sometimes we forget and leave it here in the hallway.”

“Clare’s room is up there,” Phyl said to Fuller, starting up the stairs. Fuller followed and Jess, after a nod from Graham went with them.

“How many girls live in this house?” Fuller asked.

“Usually ten, plus Mrs. Mac. But there are only three of us here tonight. Christmas holidays.”

As they disappeared up the stairs, Graham picked up the receiver and started to dial.

Silently Phyl led them to Clare’s room, opened the door and switched on the light.

“Here we are. All of the rooms are about the same. Not very fancy as you can see.”

Fuller nodded and moved about the room, picking up a hanger from the floor and tossing it on Clare’s bed, looking at the suitcase, opening

drawers, peering into the closet.

"Tell me about the calls," he said.

Phyl nodded to Jess who cleared her throat and began. "They've called several times before but usually they don't say anything."

"They?"

"A figure of speech. I suppose I should say, but I'm not sure actually if, oh, I guess it *has* to be a man. But, this afternoon there was a call, a woman's voice. I thought at first it was a wrong number. But then she started screaming at me and she wouldn't listen to anything I said."

"So you're not sure if it's a man or woman?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a man. More of the words and the awful things are said in a man's voice."

"Not two people, or more?"

"I don't think so. The voices are different, but they're the same in a way. Oh, I don't know. It's so scary when it happens, so fast and you get all confused."

"Who was the last one to see Clare Harrison?"

"Well, I think I was. Unless . . ." She turned her head away.

"Now I don't want you to misinterpret this or get upset but I've got to ask. Is there any chance at all that Clare was seeing anyone besides Chris Hayden?"

The two girls looked at one another, both shaking their heads. Jess answered him. "No, I'm sure of that."

"We both are."

"Clare have any emotional problems, anything like that, anything that might make her run away and not tell anyone she was going?"

"No," Phyl said.

"Is this the way she left her room, as far as you know?"

"Yes," Jess answered.

Fuller picked up a glass from the night table and sniffed it.

"What's this?"

Jess took it from him and smelled. "We were having a party last night. Leftover punch."

"Did Clare drink a lot?"

"No," Phyl said. "Hardly at all."

He went back to the closet as he asked, "Did anyone see her this morning?"

"Not as far as I know. The others had all left and I know that I didn't . . . she wasn't down at breakfast."

"The others leave yesterday?"

“Yes. All but the three of us.”

“Can you give me a list of the others, the other girls’ home telephone numbers?”

“I can’t. But I think there’s one in Mrs. Mac’s room.”

“Who’s Mrs. Mac?”

As they went out of the room, Jess said, “She’s the house mother. Her room is down the hall.”

She led the way and when they went into Mrs. Mac’s room she said, “I know she keeps a list somewhere in here.”

She moved about the room and Fuller followed the pattern that he adopted in Clare’s room, browsing through the room, careful not to disturb anything.

As he studied the picture of the two showgirls taken so many years before, Jess asked him, “Do you think there’s any connection between Clare and the girl they found in the park?”

“I don’t know. Where is the house mother anyway? What’s her name? Mrs. Mac?”

Phyl said, “She was going to her sister’s for the holidays. Leaving tonight.”

At the same time, Jess called out, “I found it.”

“Good.” Fuller picked up the telephone and said, “You said there were no extensions. This isn’t the same line as downstairs?”

“No. It’s Mrs. Mac’s private line. She needs it. We keep the other one tied up a good deal of the time.”

Dryly he said, “I don’t doubt that.” He thanked Jess as she handed him the list of numbers and then asked, “Did any of the threatening calls come through on this line?”

“No,” Phyl said as they left the room. “They were all on the house phone. At least as far as we know. Mrs. Mac never said anything about getting any, and knowing her, I’m sure she would have.”

They went down the hall and started down the stairs where they could see Bill Graham working on the downstairs telephone line.

“Did you get any deliveries yesterday?” Fuller asked. “Or was there anybody working at the house or anything like that?”

“I don’t know. Mrs. Mac should know, though,” Jess replied.

“Is her number on here?”

He handed Jess the list and after scanning it the girl replied, “Yes. Her sister’s number, that is. Down at the bottom.”

Passing Graham, who didn’t look up from his work, they went into the living room. “Is there anyone else in the house?”

“Just one other girl. Barbara Pollard. She had a bit too much to

drink today."

"Mrs. Mac put her to bed," Phyl said. "She was pretty bad and Mr. Harrison. He was upset."

Jess said, "She's sleeping it off upstairs."

"Is she the one who was with you at the station house today?" Fuller asked Phyl.

"Yes. She caused a little trouble there, too."

"Yeah, I heard about her. Let's let her sleep." He glanced around the room and then called into the hall. "You just about finished, Graham?"

A voice came back, "Uh-huh." Then the man appeared in the doorway. "What I've done," he said holding the telephone up for all to see, "is tapped this phone so that when it rings, it'll ring at the station house, too. At the same time I'll be at the phone company checking the location of the source of the call. That way the station house can listen in and try to get a line on the guy while I try to find out where he's calling from. Are there any other phones in the house?"

"Yes," Jess said, "the house mother has one in her room."

"But it's a different number, Graham. And there haven't been any calls on it."

Graham put the phone down and went back into the hall where he began to gather up his tools. "Whoever answers, if he calls again, you're going to have to keep this guy on the phone as long as possible. We've got a mechanical system, not an electronic one, and it will take a while. We'll be trying various plugs once we get the exchange. I know it's not very pleasant, but . . ."

"We'll be all right," Jess said.

Fuller led the girls to the front door saying, "Come here, I want to show you something." He opened the door and pointed to a car in the shadows across the street. "We have a man watching the house. So you've got nothing to worry about."

Jess and Phyl looked at one another and Jess said, "Yeah, sure."

They stood together in the doorway watching Lieutenant Fuller and Bill Graham get into their car and drive away. Both girls, as the car went out of sight turned their attention to the car across the way where they hoped the officer on duty was keeping a sharp eye on the house. Fuller waved as the police car turned the corner but neither girl was able to see him.

Finally they went back inside and closed and locked the door unaware that in addition to the police officer resting in his car, Peter Smythe was hiding in a clump of bushes not far from the house and had angrily watched the two men drive away and the two girls go



back into the house.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Phyllis Thompson was holding herself in as she took off her coat and hung it in the hall closet. She could hear Jess out in the kitchen and, afraid to be alone, she followed the sound. When she came into the cozy room all of her defences broke down and she found herself sobbing in Jess's arms.

Jess held her for a minute before she said, "Did you see the little girl?"

"No. They had her covered when I got there. I saw her mother, though. That was enough. Oh, God, Jess. I know Clare is dead. I can just feel it. It can't just be a coincidence. Those calls and that girl. It's got to be some kind of madman."

Soothing the other girl, Jess said, "Come on now, Phyl. We don't know that for sure." As she patted Phyl, Jess told herself that she wished she was as sure as her voice sounded. Unfortunately, she was beginning to feel the way Phyl did: that Clare, too, was dead and the phone calls had not ceased.

"Poor Mr. Harrison," Phyl said, breaking away and going to the stove, "I feel so sorry for him. Want some tea?"

"No, thanks. It'll keep me awake. You shouldn't, either."

"No, I guess you're right. It was something to do, that's all."

"How's Chris?"

"Oh, he's great. Hanging in there. You know Chris."

The two girls moved into the living room as Phyl said, "I'm sorry, Jess. I'm exhausted. I've been taking these pills for my cold and they knock me out. Will you be okay if I go up to bed?"

"Yes, of course."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Go on up and get some rest. You need it. We all do."

"Call me if there's any news, even if I'm dead asleep. Wake me if they find, if they hear anything about Clare, no matter what."

"I will. Sure. Now go get some sleep."

"Thanks. Good night."

"Good night, Phyl."

Jess followed Phyl to the bottom of the stairs and watched her climb slowly up, then she picked up the telephone with the long extension cord and brought it back into the living room where she

placed it gently on the table. She looked all around the room and then sat down and stared at the phone.

Meanwhile, at the telephone company switching station, Bill Graham was peering at a complex panel of flashing lights and plugs. He put a receiver to his ear and pushed several buttons, then waited until he heard a voice in the receiver.

“That you, Jeff? Is it clear at your end? Yeah. Okay. Sure. Yeah, I’ll need about ten more minutes. Okay? The only way it will work is if they both come through the same switching station. If our boy is calling long distance, forget it. Yeah. Fuller there? Oh, no, don’t bother him. Just give him the message. Right.”

In Lieutenant Fuller’s office, Jeff put down his telephone, the one that had been tapped into the line at the sorority house and waited patiently for Fuller to finish his conversation on his private line.

“No, I’m sorry,” the lieutenant was saying, “we haven’t. I assure you we’re doing everything we can.” Finally the party at the other end hung up and Fuller banged down his phone exclaiming, “Jesus! How did they get that number? That’s what I’d like to know.” He looked over at Jeff and asked, “How’s it coming?”

“Graham’s almost ready at the switching station. About ten minutes. Now when the phone rings in that house this one will ring here. The transmitter has been removed from this receiver so they won’t be able to hear anything from this end. That means I won’t have to hold my breath.”

Fuller smiled. “Good. And thanks, Jeff. All of you guys. The cooperation has been great.”

There was a knock at the door and when Ken Fuller called out to come in, Sergeant Nash stuck his head through the doorway.

“Lieutenant, the men are here from Scarborough.”

Fuller stood up and said, “Okay. Have them hang on. I’ll brief them out there.”

At the same time he was giving his briefing Jess was standing by the window of the living room a few feet from the phone watching a police car hurry past the house, its red light flashing. After it passed she closed the curtain and restlessly moved about the room conscious all of the time of the black instrument sitting so innocently on the table.

Despite her admonition to Phyl she went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. She had just removed a cup and saucer from the cupboard when she heard a low moaning sound coming from upstairs and then someone shouting her name. Dropping the cup and saucer she ran to the front of the house and up the stairs, then down the hall to

Barbara's room where she pushed open the door.

"Barb!" she called out. "What's the matter?"

Hurrying across the room she switched on the small bedside lamp. Barb was writhing violently on the bed, her breathing labored as though in the throes of a bad dream. It was apparent to Jess, however, for she had seen it before, that Barbara was having one of her asthma attacks. Grabbing Barbara and holding her down as she struggled and gasped for air, Jess shook the girl so that she opened her eyes. When she saw Jess she pointed to the inhaler on the dresser.

Quickly Jess brought it to her and helped her put it to her nose, stroking Barbara's forehead until she had relaxed slightly and had taken a few breaths from the inhaler.

As Barbara started to cough, Jess said, "Take it easy. Don't talk, Barb. It'll be okay."

Taking several more drags on the inhaler, Barbara slowly relaxed. Her breathing started to return to normal and her body had ceased twitching. Still stroking her Jess repeated, "It's okay. It's okay."

Still having difficulty with speaking Barb managed to gasp, "Oh, my God!" She lay still for a minute and then said, "I guess I was having a nightmare. I thought someone was coming into my room. The door seemed to open and I heard someone moaning. Probably dreaming about the sex maniac who's been calling. I guess it was the scare that brought on the asthma attack."

"Well, it's all right now. Just relax."

Barbara stared at the ceiling before she said, "I should be so lucky as to have a stranger come into my room."

Ignoring the last remark, Jess asked, "Feel better?"

Nodding, Barbara answered, "How did I get so drunk? I was really bombed. I don't know what I'm trying to do to myself. Boy, I really wiped out tonight. I can't remember a thing." Beginning to cry she added, "God, sometimes I really wonder what I'm doing, what the hell I'm trying to prove."

"Don't, Barb."

"I don't know why I act like that. The girls here are the only family I've ever really had and all I do is drive them away. Always some loud-mouth, smart-ass remark, and usually dirty, too."

"Barb, don't do this to yourself."

"You think I don't know why you said you'd go skiing with me? You knew I was going to be alone for most of the holidays. So you said . . . And just because Clare wouldn't, or couldn't. Why do I always drive people away? That's not what I want to do."

Not knowing what to say, Jess sat silently for a few minutes while

Barbara, although she had stopped crying, closed her eyes tightly. At last just when Jess thought she had gone back to sleep, she asked, "What happened tonight? I thought I heard someone yelling."

"Peter was here. We had a fight."

"What about?"

"Oh, it's not worth going into. Just one of those things. He was screaming by the time he left, but he'll calm down. He always does." She smiled at Barbara. "The temperamental, artistic type."

Drowsily Barbara replied, "Well, maybe you should call him just so things aren't left in such an unfriendly state. Remember, it's Christmas, the time to forgive . . ."

Her voice trailed off as she fell back to sleep. Because her breathing was still heavy Jess sat with her for a while. And it was the breathing of Barbara that kept Jess from hearing the other, heavier breathing from out in the hall where a man stood, watching the door from the vantage point of the dark shadows of the stairwell.

In there. Two of them. Oh, God, maybe I should. No, they wouldn't understand. She'd laugh at me. Say something awful, like she did on the phone. Dirty. I hate dirty. It's bad. Nasty Billy does dirty things. Wash his mouth out with soap. Take down his pants. You were bad. That's what you did. No I didn't. I wasn't bad. You were! Say you were! Admit it or I'll keep hitting you! Admit it. Say it. Say 'Nasty Billy.' Bad! Bad! Dirty. Dirty.

A chorus of voices from outside broke into "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen" and Jess, sure that Barbara was asleep started for the door. Down the hall, a figure moved further into the shadows as she came out of Barbara's room and went down the stairs to greet the carolers.

The man slowly moved toward Barbara's door once Jess was out of sight. He paused when he heard the front door open and the voices from outside became louder, then slowly, as though against his will he made his way to Barbara's room.

Jess went out without a coat and smiled at the shiny, red-cheeked faces that were ranged across the snow-covered lawn of the sorority house. A child stepped forward with a sign that had the letters UNICEF on it as the children raised their voices joyfully. From the front steps Jess watched and listened, oblivious to what was happening upstairs where the muted sound of the singing came through the closed door of Barbara's room. In a deep sleep Barbara was unaware of the shadow that passed across her face as it lay peacefully on the pillow, unaware of the raspy breathing, the sickening sound of the demented voice.

Quietly, as if a child, he began to talk to the sleeping form.

“Don’t you tell, Agnes. Promise not to tell. You’ll be sorry. Please don’t tell. Agnes? Promise now. I won’t do it again. I just didn’t know. I wanted to. There now, don’t worry. It didn’t hurt. There’s no need to be upset. Don’t tell, Agnes. I won’t do it again. I couldn’t help myself, but it wouldn’t be fair for you to tell.”

Barbara stirred uncomfortable in her sleep, shifting her position.

“Stay still, Agnes. Stay still when I tell you to. It won’t hurt. That’s right. Just lay there. I promise it won’t hurt. Only you mustn’t tell anyone. That’s nice, Agnes. Oh, that’s nice. I told you it was nice. Pretty Agnes. Nice Agnes. Don’t tell. Go to sleep. That’s right, go to sleep. It didn’t hurt, did it?”

On the edge of consciousness, Barbara stirred again. The voice stopped and she awakened hearing a low, gurgling, choking sound, incredibly vile. Her eyes came open and she looked wildly about, sure she was having another dream—until she saw the shadow in front of her, heard the sound raising in intensity and then a voice shrieked out.

“Nasty Billy!”

In confusion she tried to focus her eyes on the shadow but could see only its eyes, the eyes of a mindless beast. It moved toward her and she reached her hand out for the lamp on the table, tried to cover her face with her pillow, to sit up, to call out but the scream stuck in her throat as she watched the thing come closer to her, a gleaming knife in its hand, raised in a high arc above her body.

Suddenly she could see the distorted face as well as the wild eyes and the terror of it forced the scream from her throat as the knife swung down into her chest and outside the children raised their youthful, optimistic voices in the final bars of the song as the frenzied man struck the knife over and over again into Barb’s helpless body.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jess stood there, unaware of the chill, applauding the children as a station wagon pulled up and a woman got out of the driver's seat and ran across the lawn to the children and the middle-aged woman who was shepherding them.

"Jean," she said in an agitated manner while keeping her voice low, "get the children into the cars."

"Why? What's up?"

"Please, there's no time for questions. I don't want to talk about it here. They might hear. Just get them into the cars."

Jess had slipped back into the hall and had gotten a dollar from her coat pocket which she carried out to the lawn as the two women were conversing.

"Let's go, children!" the one called Jean was saying. "Pile into the wagons. Either one. We're going to go now."

There was a chorus of disappointment so she added, "We'll get some hot cocoa and cookies at my place."

Jess handed the woman a dollar and she said half-heartedly, "Thank you."

The other one, the one who had driven up noticed the quizzical expression on Jess's face, so she said, "There was a little girl found murdered over in the park tonight."

"Yes, I heard."

"Your phone is ringing."

"Oh, yes, excuse me."

"Certainly. Good night."

Jean called from the door of her station wagon. "And thanks again for the contribution. Sorry we couldn't stay longer."

But Jess was already in the house and had closed the door. She went directly into the living room and then, taking a deep breath, lifted the receiver.

At headquarters the phone was ringing, too and Lieutenant Ken Fuller rushed into his office ready to grab it while down at the switching station Bill Graham stood alertly in front of the flashing light on the panel that told him that the number at the sorority house was being called.

Jess put her hand on the receiver but felt that it was frozen there.

The room seemed suddenly dark and eerie despite the fact that all of the living room lights, including those on the Christmas tree, were on. Telling herself that she was being foolish and a coward she finally lifted the receiver gently from the cradle and put it to her ear.

As soon as it was up, Fuller lifted his phone and Graham started to scan the large panel, holding a long cable and a jack as he listened through the set of headphones balanced over his ears.

Hesitantly Jess said, “Hello.” All she could hear was heavy breathing on the line. “Hello? Who’s there?”

Graham plugged into a socket, listened for a second, then pulled the cable out and tried another opening.

Upstairs in the sorority house the caller sat on the edge of Mrs. MacHenry’s bed, her telephone receiver held tightly in his hand. There were tears rolling down his face as he tried to speak to Jess but only a soft, whimpering sound, like that of a child, emitted from his lips.

“Who is it?” Jess pleaded.

Suddenly a woman’s voice broke harshly into the crying. “Stop this! Nasty Billy! Nasty Billy! Nasty Billy! What an evil child.” The voice seemed to be losing control as it ranted on. “You filthy little beast!” Then there was a scream of pain followed by wheezing.

The caller covered the receiver and leaned over, vomiting on the floor beside Mrs. MacHenry’s bed.

Jess stood stock still, expecting the receiver to click while Graham furiously tried another, then another socket.

There was another scream, as though a child were being beaten, then a man’s voice, rational, mature, almost pompous.

“Billy,” the man said, “now you must tell us the truth, Billy. Your mother and I have to know. Is this true? Did you?” There was gagging and then more silence followed by a raspy whispering voice that spoke tauntingly, hatefully to her. “You never have had any consideration for me! Never. Always self, self, self.” The woman’s voice hissed out, “It was just like having a wart removed.”

Shocked, Jess reacted. “Oh, my God!”

Then there was a click and she heard a dial tone. At the phone company Graham banged his fist against the wall and shook his head in frustration. He slipped off the earphones and dialed a number. Standing by the window with her hand over her mouth, an incredulous and frightened look on her face, Jess Bradley heard the ringing of the telephone. She looked around in a daze, saw the instrument and walked in a stupor toward it. At the fifth ring she picked it up and said in a weak voice, “Hello?”

It was Ken Fuller, “I’m sorry, Jess, We didn’t get it. Graham just

called me. There's wasn't enough time. He has to try every connection. Unless he gets lucky. Anyway, next time you'll just have to try to keep him on the line longer. Do you think you can?"

When she didn't answer he asked, "Are you there, Jess. Did you hear me? You'll have to keep him on longer."

"Oh, I see."

"Are you all right? You don't sound too good."

Making an effort she said, "No. I'm fine."

"What happened, Jess? You cried out there at one point, right at the end, before he hung up. Something like, 'Oh, God.' Did you recognize something?"

"No. I guess it was just kind of getting to me. I feel pretty sick, to tell you the truth."

"We all do. Did the call make any sense to you? Did it sound like something or somebody, *any*body you know?"

"Uh, no. No, it didn't."

"Are you sure? Before, when he called, did he use more than one voice like this?"

"Yes. He used several different voices."

"The same ones?"

"I'm not sure. I think . . . No, I think the man's voice was different."

"Damn it, I don't know what to think. Jess, now tell me, is it possible, do you think maybe it's possible that it's somebody putting you on? Some kid you know. Something like that?"

"No," she answered dully, "I don't think so."

"I see. Jess, I meant to ask you before. Who was that guy who was leaving the house tonight when we arrived?"

"My boyfriend, Peter."

"Were you having a fight?"

"Sort of. But—"

She was interrupted by the sound of a lot of noise coming from Fuller's office. Over the phone she could tell that someone had come in and that there was a great deal of hollering going on.

An old farmer named Jack Weller was in the arms of two policemen, struggling to get into Fuller's office. Behind him another officer was bending over and trying to look back to examine his nether regions which were covered with red spots.

Weller was yelling at the top of his lungs in a high-pitched voice, "I'm not lettin' no son of a bitch trespass on my land in the middle of the night, no matter what kind of uniform he's wearin'. You hear that, sonny?" he hollered out to the man in the other room.

"Oh, shit," Fuller said. "Excuse me, Jess. I'll have to call you back, okay?"

"Yes," she answered, telling herself that she was not sure that she would ever answer the phone again.

"I'll call you back in a while. We'll get him on the next one."

Hanging up he turned his full attention to the man whom the officers had managed to pull back out of his office, getting up from his desk and going to the outer area and yelling, "What the hell is going on!"

One of the officers who held Weller said, "He fired on a police officer when we were trying to search his barn."

"Goddamn right I did! Do it again, too. Bastard was trespassin'."

"Cogan got an ass full of buckshot."

Cogan, who was still bent over said, "Yeah, and I'm gonna make the son of a bitch pick everyone of them out with his scrag teeth. You stupid old bastard, you could of killed someone."

"Next time," Weller hollered, "you'll get the gun up your ass, too, sideways."

Fuller turned and went back into his office, his hand to his head, slamming the door behind him.

Back in the house Phyl came out of her room followed by Jess. She was tying a bathrobe around her and her eyes were heavy with sleep.

Jess was saying, "I'm sorry I woke you. But I had to tell someone. God, Phyl, what am I going to do?"

"I don't know." As they started down the stairs she added, "Look, if you really think it was Peter, why didn't you just tell the police?"

"Because I'm not really sure! What a mess. It didn't sound like him, but I don't know. Suppose it wasn't. How could I do that to him?"

"He should be stopped. Whoever it is should be stopped. I've hardly had a minute's sleep. Clare's missing. You're a wreck, there's a dead high school girl out there. He should be stopped. This house is a nightmare. There's been so much noise. What was all that yelling about? I heard a scream."

"Barb had an asthma attack. She was having a nightmare. Who wouldn't after all we've been through? And she'd had so much to drink."

"Is she all right, now?"

"Yeah, she's okay. She's sleeping it off."

They went into the living room and Jess lit a cigarette. "Christ, I *gave up* smoking. I wish I knew where Mrs. Mac had her sherry hidden. I'd kill the whole damn bottle."

“Try to calm down, Jess.”

“He repeated almost word for word what Peter said to me tonight. Almost word for word.”

“Couldn’t it be a coincidence?”

“God, Phyl, I don’t know. I’m so confused. I wish I were a kid again. I was watching those little kids singing Christmas carols and I remembered. I wish I were ten years old.”

“Look, I don’t really think it could be Peter. You know I don’t like him much, but I don’t think he’s sick, not *that* sick. He gets my goat the way he acts so superior sometimes because he’s talented, but that doesn’t make him some kind of nut.”

“I can’t believe he would do this. He’s so gentle most of the time. He has a temper but usually only when he’s under a lot of pressure, when he’s tired. But to deliberately, and I can’t even believe it’s compulsive, that he can’t help himself . . . It’s so unlike him. I’m really so sick and scared I don’t know what to do.”

“Are you sure that policeman is still out there?”

Phyl got up and to answer her own question she went to the window where she stared at the car parked across the street. “Yeah, he’s still there. Probably sound asleep, if he isn’t frozen to death.”

The man in the car, Jennings, was not asleep. Nor was he frozen. But he *was* dead, very dead, with his throat cut.

Back in the house, the telephone began to ring.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The telephone continued to ring as Jess and Phyl stared at one another across the living room. Instantly it continued its harsh summons. Finally, with a sigh, Jess went to it and looking at Phyl prayerfully picked up the receiver, saying the inevitable, “Hello?”

At the switching station Graham, when the red light appeared, put down his container of lukewarm coffee and slipped on the earphones. At the same time he dialed Fuller’s private line and when Ken answered told him to be alerted.

“Yeah. See if you can get it. We’ll hold our breaths.”

Peter Smythe said, “Jess?”

Over the phone she reacted when she heard his voice, tried to keep the quavering out of her own voice as she answered. “Peter?”

Starting to cry, Peter said, “Oh, God, Jess. Help me.”

Ken Fuller had picked up the other phone and he heard Peter’s voice, listening curiously to the conversation.

As Phyl watched her Jess said to Peter, “Look, Peter, don’t cry. We can straighten things out. There’s nothing to get so upset about.”

“Jess, we can’t kill the baby. Please Jess. We can’t kill the baby! Do you hear me? It isn’t right.”

Scrambling through the panels, plugging into every light, Bill Graham was trying desperately to find the source of the call.

Jess remained still for a moment and when Peter stopped speaking she waited but he said no more. At last she asked, “Peter, where are you?”

“Please, Jess, please! You know how I feel about the baby. Please, it’s not right. You can’t kill a baby.”

“Please, Peter. Don’t do this to yourself.”

Still crying, Peter said, “Don’t hurt the baby.”

“Stop this, Peter!”

“That’s what they always do. We can’t be like them.”

“Peter, tell me where you are?”

There was a click and Jess heard the dial tone, as did Ken Fuller. He put the other phone to his ear just in time to hear Graham say, “I’m sorry, Ken, the calls just aren’t long enough.”

Through a partly opened door at the top of the stairs the man looked down through the dark wooden railing. The angle was such

that he could just see into the living room and the telephone that sat on a table by the doorway. Breathing heavily he waited for a minute, then scurried back down the hall.

Jess sood watching Phyl whose head was averted, staring out the window, wishing she had left the room when Peter called.

Both girls jumped when the phone rang again and Jess, as she was the closer of the two, answered it.

"Jess, it's Ken Fuller. Do you want to tell me what that was all about?"

"You listened to that?"

"Yes. We're monitoring all of the calls to try to find out who it is and where he's calling from. Jess, what did he mean about killing the baby? Is it related to the other call? Jess?" There was a long pause and when she didn't answer him he said, "I think it's important that you tell me what that call was all about."

Jess sagged and leaned against the table. Looking helplessly across the room at Phyllis who was still at the window she said, "I'm pregnant. I told him I didn't want to have the baby."

"When did you tell him this?"

"Today," she answered flatly.

" 'We can't kill the baby.' That's a strange way to put it, don't you think?"

Jess shrugged, wishing she could just hang up and run from the house never to use a telephone again. "Peter's an artist. He's a composer, a musician, very high strung. He tends to dramatize things sometimes, but that doesn't mean—"

"He's neurotic is what you're saying?"

Defensively Jess answered, "No more than a lot of people."

There was another long pause and Fuller finally said, "Jess, are you sure you're telling me the whole truth? I've got a strong feeling you're holding something back from me. Look, I don't want it to be your boyfriend; I don't want it to be Peter. But I've got to check out every possibility. It's my job, and maybe, well, it does fit together. Look, think back. Was Peter with you any time when you got any of those calls?"

She thought for a moment and then said in an excited voice, "Yes! Yes, he was here! He was at the house when the first call came tonight. That's right. He was here tonight. He was taking a nap upstairs when the call came so it couldn't have been him. It couldn't have been Peter!" Happily she turned to Phyllis and said, "Phyl, it couldn't have been Peter. He was here one of the times."

"You see? So there's no need to worry," Fuller said. "All the same

I'd like to talk to him. He's obviously very upset, and it wouldn't do . . . We don't need your line tied up for one thing. Could you tell me where he is? Where I can get in touch with him?"

"He lives at Baker House but when he gets like this he goes over to the Music Conservatory; you know, part of the Recital Hall, and he has a key so he goes in and plays."

"Thanks. We'll try to trace him. If you get any more calls you've got to keep them on the phone longer. You're not giving our man enough time to trace. Talk to him. Charm him if you have to."

"I'm trying. I really am. But it's not easy. It really upsets me and then I can't think of anything to say."

"Yeah, I know. It's okay. You're doing a good job but try to hold him a little longer. I'll talk to you in a while."

"Right. Sure." She hung up and ran to Phyl saying, "Thank God!"

Phyl smiled at her. "I knew it couldn't have been Peter."

Sergeant Nash was standing beside Lieutenant Kirby describing to him the progress of the search as he pointed out the various areas on the map that hung on the wall of the police station.

"Yeah," the Sergeant was saying, "they've covered the entire campus area and now they're moving over towards the lake. I don't know where we're going to go from there. The lake's frozen, by the way. If—"

"Don't. I don't even want to think about the lake tonight. Let *me* figure out where we go from there, Nash. But it's not going to be to the bottom of the lake. You might have them check tomorrow, though, to make sure is hasn't been broken through any place. It doesn't look to me as if our killer cares much about hiding his victims. That Quaife girl was practically out in the open."

"Right, Lieutenant. By the way, there are more men coming in from Willowdale."

"Good. They can start at the south end of the town and just work their way through on a house to house search."

"Okay," Nash said, his voice registering his doubts about the efficacy of a house to house search for a man they could not identify.

Fuller returned to his desk and sat down, shaking his head. Then he got up and came back into the front room calling to the sergeant.

"Nash, I want you to see if you can get the Dean of Admissions on the phone. I know he's going to love you for this, but it's necessary. I want to see the records on a Peter Smythe, a student at the Music College. It's spelled S—M—Y—T—H—E. If he has to go over to the

office try to placate him. But he has to go. And have a car sent round right away."

While he was giving his instructions to Nash, the two girls were standing in the kitchen of the sorority house. Water was running in the sink as Phyl prepared to fill the kettle. All thoughts of sleep had left her for the moment and Jess too, seemed more awake, elated almost. Phyl watched Jess leave the room and then called after her, "Hey, Jess! Do you want one or two?"

Just beyond, in the dining room, Jess stood looking out the window. "Two, please. You should see. There's a big crowd coming down the street."

Suddenly she heard a blood-curdling scream from the kitchen and she rushed out there to find Phyl standing against the wall trembling, her finger pointing toward the window of the kitchen door where a man's face peered in at her. He was obviously speaking but they could not hear what he was saying through the door. Finally he knocked on the pane and pointed to the lock. Neither girl moved until a second man appeared with a rifle cradled on his arm. Phyl remained transfixed but Jess realized who the men were, went to the door, unlatched it and slipped on the safety chain, opening the door as far as the chain would permit.

The man, who looked quite harmless, spoke to her. "Hello. Sorry to scare you like that, miss," he called over Jess's shoulder to Phyl. "We're with the search party."

Still unsure. Phyl called back, "Wha—what do you want?"

"We just wanted to ask you if you've seen anything peculiar around here tonight?"

"Not until you got here."

Amused, Jess said, "Phyl!"

Phyllis laughed finally and said, "Well, they scared the shit out of me."

The second man, the one with the gun said, "We're sorry, miss. But you know a girl was murdered in the park tonight."

Shaking her head, Jess said, "Yes, we know."

And Phyl added, "Boy, do we know."

"Well, we're helping the police look for the killer."

Jess reached for the safety chain. "Do you want to come in and rest for a few minutes?"

In the background the kettle whistled and Phyl automatically reached out and turned it off.

"No, thanks," the man said. "We don't want to trouble you. We just wanted to see if you'd seen anything suspicious around here tonight."

“No. We haven’t *seen* anything suspicious. Sorry,” Jess replied.

“Well, just keep your doors and windows locked up tight and you’ll be nice and safe. And warm.”

“Thanks, we will. Good night.” Phyl said.

Jess added, “And good luck.”

“Thank you,” the first man said. “There might be other people coming to the door, on the search, but better be careful. Don’t let anyone in unless you’re absolutely sure. Well, goodnight.”

He backed away and Jess closed the door, throwing the lock again. Turning to Jess she said, “You know, I think this may be the only door or window in the whole house that *is* locked. I suppose he’s right. Maybe we’d better, just to be on the safe side.”

Phyl started out of the kitchen. “Right. You go down here. I’ll get upstairs. Although I can’t figure how he’d get up to the second floor.” On her way up the stairs she called back, “Jess, make sure that cop is still out there.”

“Relax, Phyl. I’m sure he’s still there.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jess twisted the locks on all of the windows downstairs and then pushed the front door tightly shut with her shoulder until she heard the lock click.

Upstairs, Phyl checked the windows, many of which were already closed and locked, unaware that her movements were being followed closely by a pair of haunted eyes that watched from the open trapdoor of the attic at the end of the hall.

She hesitated at Barbara's door, not wanting to waken the girl, but finally decided that to be on the safe side it would be best to check Barbara's windows, too. Besides, she told herself. I can see if she's all right.

It was dark in the room and Phyl stopped short at the doorway, listening for Barbara's breathing. When she heard nothing she moved a little way in and whispered toward the bed. "Barb? Hey, Barb? Are you awake?" A few more steps and she collided with a chair, reaching out and steadying it and herself as she tried to adjust her eyes to the blackness. The light from the hall that came through the open door was so slight (she mentally cursed Mrs. Mac for the twenty-five watt bulbs in all the halls) that she could barely make out the bed and the form resting on it.

"Hey, Barb. Turn on a light, will you?"

She stopped suddenly for she now heard breathing, only it was coming from behind her. She turned quickly, just in time to see a hand shove the door shut and throw the bedroom into total darkness. Before she could scream or utter a word, he was on her, both hands to her throat and she sank into unconsciousness without being aware of who or what had attacked her.

At the Music Conservatory, Ken Fuller went carefully from room to room calling Peter Smythe's name but the building was, as far as he could tell, completely empty. Only one room got his attention. He stopped short when he saw the wreckage of a grand piano standing forlornly in the middle of one of the practice rooms; he bit his lower lip and then hurried from the room and out of the building to his waiting car.

From the bottom of the stairs Jess called up, "Hey, Phyl? All locked up down here. How are you doing? Hey, Phyl? Are you there? Don't play games, Phyl. This is Christmas, not Halloween." Apprehensive, she started slowly up the stairs but was stopped by the ringing of the

telephone in the living room. Nervously she looked up, then back down in the direction of the sound, finally made up her mind, turned around and walked back quickly to the living room, switching on a light and picking up the receiver at the same time. “Hello?”

The voice was like an electric shock; it almost knocked the phone from her hand, not from the decibal count but from the bizarre, disgusting sound that it produced on her already jangled nerves. It was a wild, animal scream piercing her ear, then sobs and finally a child’s voice, that of a little girl crying out in terror.

“Mommy! Help!” There was gagging, whimpering and then the voice spoke again, still that of a little girl. “Billy! Don’t do that! Ow! You’re hurting!” The crying was interrupted by the voice of an older woman, furious, almost screaming.

“I saw that! He put his hands between her legs! For Christ’s sake! You filthy little animal!”

There was gasping as though two people were locked in a mortal struggle and the little boy’s voice came on the line, pleading. “Don’t tell, Agnes, please don’t tell.”

Without a pause, not missing a beat, the voice changed once more to that of a little girl screaming out, “Nasty Billy! Nasty Billy!”

Just before he got into his car, Ken Fuller was hailed by a patrol car hurrying up to him full speed. A uniformed officer called from the window, “Lieutenant Fuller! That guy’s on the phone again, back at the sorority house.”

Fuller leaped into his car and switched on his two-way radio, signalling for Sergeant Nash.

Graham, still at the switchboard, was desperately plugging the jack into each lighted socket, hoping against hope that this time the caller would stay on the line long enough for him to make a contact and trace the number.

To Jess, standing tense, rigid with fear and anxiety, it seemed as though the caller had been talking for hours, changing personalities so fast that she could hardly organize her thoughts. Now he seemed to be a cat, meowing vigorously and then giggling madly, alternately wild beast and madman.

Again everything stopped and she, as well as Bill Graham, thought he was about to hang up. Instead, once more the whispering, pleading voice came over the wire. “Oh, God! Stop me! Please! Please stop me!”

This was followed by roars, growls and then moans.

By this time Nash had plugged the call into Lieutenant Fuller’s radio so that Ken was now picking up the one-sided conversation, too. He sat there watching the radio as though somehow staring at it would

give him the answer to the problem.

The caller's voice reverted to that of the older woman, as he cried out hysterically, "Damn it! I know what you did!"

A little boy answered her. "No, mommy. I didn't."

"Yes, you did! You put your hand down between her legs and then you killed her! You smothered my baby!"

Animal screams of anguish so horrified Jess that she almost slammed down the receiver at just the moment when Bill Graham's expression changed from one of alert concern to an almost relaxed smile. He studied the board carefully, wrote down a number on a piece of paper and started rapidly leafing through a cross-reference telephone book.

Standing alone in the big room Jess listened to the call with distaste, wondering from time to time what had become of Phyl, looking toward the hallway and the stairs, wishing that Phyl would come down so that she could share (if that was the right word) her revulsion with another human being.

The soothing voice of the older man did nothing to assuage her disgust as he said, "Now, dear, don't worry. We'll find Agnes. She's probably with Billy. Yes, that must be it. She's probably in Billy's room. Just calm down dear."

There was a scream and the little girl cried out, "Ow! It hurts! Mommy! Mommy!" Her voice became muffled as she started to scream more desperately.

The sound was interrupted on Lieutenant Fuller's radio by the voice of Sergeant Nash. "Lieutenant Fuller?"

Pushing a button, Fuller said, "Yes, Nash. What is it?"

"Graham's on the other line, sir. He says he has got a trace on this one."

"Great! Let's have it."

"He says the calls are coming from one-oh-six Belmont Street."

"Dammit, Nash, you got it wrong! For Christ's sake! That's where the calls are going into."

"That's where they're coming from, too, sir. I told that to Graham, but he said it must be the other—"

"Shit!" Fuller screamed as it came to him what was happening. He pushed another button and yelled into the microphone. "Jennings! Jennings!" Frantically he jammed the button. "Goddam it, Jennings! Jennings! Where the hell are you, Jennings!

When he got no answer from the plainclothesman who was supposedly on duty in front of the sorority house he switched back over to the squad room.

"Nash!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Nash, I can't get Jennings. God knows where he went. Now this is an emergency, Nash. I want you to call that girl, Jessica Bradley. Call her as soon as I sign off. Now, look, Nash. Calm yourself before calling her, then tell *her* to be calm. Don't tell her that the guy is in the house. Just tell her to put the phone down and walk quietly to the front door and out into the street. Tell her to go to Jennings in the car across the way. Now, listen to me, Nash. If you blow this one, I'll kill you! Tell her to go outside. Tell her I'll be there in five minutes. And as soon as you hang up try to raise Jennings and tell him to get his ass out of that car and get across the street to help her. Got that?"

He already had the car in gear and he was speeding away toward the sorority house as Nash answered him, "Yes, sir."

In the meantime the caller had hung up and Jess, after putting back the receiver walked to the bottom of the stairs, obviously frightened as she called up, "Phyl! Phyl! Answer me, Phyl! Where are you? Phyl, please answer me!"

The phone rang again and she ran back to it almost as if it offered her only hope of contact with the world, grabbing up the receiver and crying out, "Yes, who is it?"

Sergeant Nash spoke very slowly. "Who is this?"

"Who is *this?* Oh, God, what's going on? I'm Jessica Bradley."

"Jess, this is Sergeant Nash from headquarters. Are you the only one in the house?"

"No. Barbara's asleep upstairs. So is Phyl, I think. Why?"

"All right. Now, look, Jess, I want you to do exactly what I tell you without asking any questions. Okay?"

"But . . . I don't understand."

"No questions! Now put the phone back on the hook and walk to the front door and leave the house."

"What's wrong? What's going on?"

"Jess, please. Just do what I tell you. Walk out of the house and go across the street to the car parked there. Our man, Jennings, will be waiting for you."

"Okay, if you say so. I'll get Phyl and Barb."

As she started to hang up the phone he yelled into it, "Jess! Don't do that."

"What?"

"Don't do that! Jess. He's in the house! The calls are coming from the house."

She lowered the phone, turned and looked up the stairs, stricken.

Nash was screaming over the wire, “Get out, Jess, Don’t go upstairs. Just walk to the door and get out! The police are on the way.”

She hardly heard what he said. Her eyes were riveted on the second floor as she edged her way slowly toward the hall and the door which meant escape. Numb with fear she could not look away from the upstairs landing. She was having a terrible struggle within herself while her mouth was saying softly, “Barb! Phyl!” Her soft words, spoken almost prayerfully, were not heard and when she reached the door she called again, this time screaming out the names of her two friends, “Barb! Phyl!”

Only silence greeted her. She desperately wanted to run from the house but something held her there, some force, or perhaps her own will, her anger and hatred at what had been happening to her, to all of them. Suddenly she bolted back into the living room, ran to the fireplace and grabbed up the iron poker that leaned against the red brick. Warily she moved out of the living room and started up the stairs, her face white with fear, compelled to go forward, not to retreat.

At the top of the stairs, she called softly, “Barb! Barb.”

Down the hall she went to Barbara’s room, stopping in front of the partially opened door. “Barb!”

She pushed the door but it hardly budged. She shoved again and it gave a bit. Leaning against it she pushed hard and suddenly it gave way and she half fell into the room. With the door open the dim light from the hall cast enough illumination for her to see, sitting on the bed, the bodies of Barb and Phyl, their heads twisted around, their eyes bulging.

On her knees her mind would not register the ghastly sight she saw. For a moment nothing happened and then she heard a sound that sent chills through her whole body. She looked up wildly and saw standing in the doorway of the closet a dim figure. There was only enough light to make out his eyes but his words were clear.

“Billy’s a bad boy! Billy killed the baby!”

Slowly the closet door swung open.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Her fear galvanized her. Leaping to her feet she shoved the door back and was met by an outraged cry of pain. She ran out into the hall and took the stairs down two at a time, the poker still firmly in her grasp. The man in the room began to howl in rage as he started after her.

The sound grew louder as she struggled to unlock the front door which had become jammed. The stubborn bolt wouldn't budge and the howling was punctuated with footsteps coming closer to the stairwell. Realizing the door would not open she looked around frantically. At the end of the downstairs hall was a door that led to the basement and she told herself, as the crazed man's howl reverberated through the house, that she might be able to hide there.

She ran down the hall and into the cellar, pushing the door shut behind her. The door didn't seem to have a lock but she found a bolt that fastened and she used it although she feared that it would be next to useless against the weight of the man who was, she could tell by his footsteps overhead, rushing about the house, searching for her.

She heard his footsteps in the hall on the other side of the door and suddenly his body slammed hard against the door as he screamed out in pain and rage. He slammed against the door again and again but miraculously the bolt held.

Slowly she backed down the steps, the poker in her one hand, the other guiding her along the railing. The door was buckling but not giving and she felt gratitude that it had been so well fastened. All at once there was a deafening silence as the man on the other side stopped his pounding against the door.

A step at a time she moved down the stairs, her eyes acclimated to the dark. When she reached the bottom she looked around and saw a boiler, a coal chute and bin and various odds and ends of junk piled about.

Stopping to listen for him she thought she could hear, in the distance, the sound of a police siren. Starting to move about she stopped when she heard her name being called. She looked up in time to see a pair of legs cross in front of the narrow cellar window. They kept moving but then stopped in front of another window, this one slightly wider. Clutching the poker and cringing she backed into a corner of the cellar. The body that she could see silhouetted from the moonlight on the snow knelt by the window and called her name again.

Wide-eyed, she stared up and saw a hand wiping the accumulated dust and mud from the window and peering into the cellar.

Her face reflected the horror that she felt when she realized that it was Peter!

Muffled and placating his voice came to her. “Jess, I know you’re in there. Let me in.”

She didn’t answer, but instead backed further away from the window and Peter Smythe. All at once there was a loud noise as she bumped into a stack of boxes and knocked several of them over.

“Jess!” Peter called. “Let me in.”

All at once he stood up and his foot lashed out, kicking in the glass and the entire window frame. It smashed onto the floor with a crash and then she could see him easing himself through the opening and coming to rest a few yards away from her on the cellar floor.

Very quietly, as he felt his way around in the darkness, Peter said, “Where are you, Jess?”

Wandering about, feeling into corners and behind boxes he said, “Jess. Don’t hide from me, Jess. I want to talk to you. Jess, we can’t kill the baby. It wouldn’t be right.”

Cowering behind the furnace she said, as he came toward her, “Don’t come near me, Peter.”

“Jess. I’m sorry, Jess.”

“Get away from me.” The sound of the siren was coming closer—and so was he. “I’m warning you, Peter, get away!”

Reaching out for her he said, “Jess, you know how much I love you. Why won’t you listen to me? Can’t we talk?”

Her arms raised involuntarily and as his hand brushed her hair she swung with all her might bringing the poker down across the side of his head with such force that he crumpled to his knees.

Looking stunned he reached up again for her and again the poker swung down on him; over and over again she hit him until finally he fell forward and was still on the floor in front of her.

Fuller’s car pulled up beside the one belonging to Jennings and Ken got out. One look through the window told him what had happened. “Oh, my God,” he said and started running toward the house as the squad car pulled up behind him and a policeman got out and followed him. The officer arrived at the front door at the same time Ken did and together they broke the glass and unbolted the door from inside.

Another policeman was running around toward the back of the house when he saw the broken window so he called out loudly to Ken, “The cellar.”

Inside, Ken found his way to the cellar door but it would not budge.

Finally the uniformed officer returned with an axe and in a matter of seconds they had the door shattered. Fuller rushed down the stairs as a flashlight from the policeman outside played about the cellar, finally stopping on the body of Peter Smythe and Jessica Bradley, the poker still in her hands, standing above him. As the light hit Peter's body she screamed and then fell forward, dropping the poker as she fainted.

"Apparently he made a phone call after every murder," Ken Fuller was saying to Chris Hayden as the two of them stood at the far end of the bedroom where Jessica Bradley slept peacefully. A doctor was by her bedside and several policemen and two ambulance attendants moved past the lieutenant and into the hall as they spoke.

"Why, I wonder?"

"Who knows, Chris. I guess he really wanted someone to stop him. Poor bastard. Couldn't help it, I suppose." As Sergeant Nash came up to them Fuller said, "By the way, Nash, you'd better phone his parents and get them down here. I feel sorry for them. The trouble with a case like this is that you end up feeling sorry for everybody."

The doctor reached over and checked Jess's pulse again, then pulled back her left eyelid. "She's way under," he said. "What time do her parents get here?"

"They'll be here in a couple of hours. They have to drive all the way from Unionville."

"All right. I'll stay with her until then."

"Did anyone notify Pat Cornell?" Chris asked.

Fuller said, "Who?"

"Phyl's boyfriend. No, I guess there was no way. Never mind, I'll do it."

Nash came back and whispered to Ken. "Lieutenant Fuller, I think we're going to have to take these bodies to the morgue in Lincolnville. The hospital here doesn't have the facilities for three more all at once, if we want an autopsy on every one."

"All right. Notify the county coroner to start right away. The others can go on down and let Lincolnville know they're coming."

"Yes, sir."

Nash stepped aside to allow Mr. Harrison, who had been standing by himself in the hall to step past the lieutenant and Chris. He watched as one of the ambulance attendants wheeled out a body covered with a sheet and then he started to follow the rolling stretcher down the hall.

Fuller said, "Everything about wrapped up here?"

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Nash replied. “The state lab guys will be here in an hour or so. It’s hard getting people, it being Christmas. They said it would take an hour at least. I’ve got McCloskey out front. You want me to leave someone in here?”

“No, the doctor’s going to stay with her.”

“The station house is full of reporters. A couple of them are here, too. Downstairs. TV guys. They want pictures.”

“Christ! Send them back to the station. I’ll talk to them there. No pictures of any of the bodies. We’ll be leaving for the station in a minute, tell them. I’ll make a statement there, on camera. That’ll get them to leave.”

“Right.”

The doctor stood up and came to the two men in the doorway as Nash started down the hall. At the top of the stairs Mr. Harrison stood watching the ambulance men move the mutilated body down the narrow stairs.

The doctor said, “God, this is unbelievable. We’ve got a mass murder on our hands. The most grisly thing I’ve ever seen.”

Mr. Harrison suddenly began to moan and crumbling he grabbed onto the edge of the railing. Before he could fall to the floor Chris was beside him holding him up. His body went limp and he made a faint whimpering sound as the doctor rushed to his side, threw his head back and examined his eyes.

“He’s in shock. Help me get him downstairs. He may be having a coronary. Hold one of those ambulances. We’ll have to take him to the hospital.”

They lifted him to his feet and slowly carried him down the stairs as Chris said, “She’ll be all right, Mr. Harrison. I really believe that. She’s going to turn up.”

The doctor said, “He can’t hear you.”

The floor was empty except for Jess’s sleeping body as Fuller, Nash, Chris and the doctor helped Mr. Harrison down to where one of the ambulance attendants was waiting with another stretcher. They loaded him onto it and Chris and the attendant, followed by the doctor and Sergeant Nash carried him to the waiting ambulance.

“McCloskey,” Fuller called to the uniformed man who held the door open for them.

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep an eye out. No one’s to come in here, especially any reporters. The girl’s asleep. Her parents will be here in a couple of hours. The lab boys from the Capitol are expected but they’re the only ones to go in. Got that?”

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. I'm going to headquarters to make a statement. I'll send you some relief as soon as the day men come on."

Fuller turned and closed the door, then went to his car trailed by two reporters who were trying to get a statement ahead of their colleagues. McCloskey watched them out of sight and then leaned back against the wall of the house.

Upstairs, Jessica Bradley slept peacefully unaware of the muffled sound coming from the attic. Up there a mad voice drifted out as the man spoke to himself.

"Nasty Billy! Nasty Billy!"

The voice changed to that of a woman saying, "Bruce, where's the baby? Where's Agnes? I can't find my baby!"

The little boy answered, "I can find her, Mommy! You wait here. I'll go get her."

The woman answered him in a relieved voice. "Oh, what a good boy you are, Billy. You're such a good boy to your mother. Such a nice boy."

The trapdoor moved almost imperceptibly and then began to creak on its rusty hinges until it was wide open. A shaft of light from the hall below illuminated Clare Harrison's dead face and Mrs. MacHenry's body still hanging from the rafters. A shadow moved across the face and the body and then something dark and subhuman began to creep down the stairs from the attic to the second floor.

Standing outside, Officer McCloskey lit a cigarette and walked a few feet from the house, staring up at the windows on the second floor, then to the first where, through the broken window of the front door he could hear faintly from inside the dark house the ringing of the telephone.